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OR,
The Worst Pill in the Box.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "NOR'WEST NICK," "MASKED MARK,"
"CHISPA CHARLEY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A RELIC OF BYGONE DAYS.

A DOLEFULLY lugubrious wail quivered through the warm, tobacco-scented atmosphere of Billy's Bower. A sound that set more than one pair of teeth on edge; that caused more than one experienced gambler to make a misplay; that drew all eyes in the direction from whence the unexpected sound proceeded.

It was a sound that seemed born of neither heaven nor of earth, when judged by the ear alone; a peculiar compound of wail, groan, screech, caterwaul and death-rattle all united, forming what might be called the hideous nightmare of a feline serenade, where the midnight troubadour sat on the ragged edge of hope and despair, fear muffling its notes one instant, while passion lent double emphasis to those succeeding.

And almost involuntarily there rose a cry of:
"Scat! you critter! your tail's afire!"

EVEN BILLY ULLMAN TURNED A SHADE PALER AND LOOKED UNEASY AS HE WATCHED THE WONDERFUL ACT OF THE MAD ATHLETE.

Inelegant, perhaps, but forcible. Yet, unlike the majority of missiles launched by the patrons of Billy's Bower, this went wide of the mark.

"Holy smoke! ef it ain't a man!" ejaculated Big Tom Bryson, as he turned in his chair to glance at the disturber.

"Ef that's a man, I want shoes nailed onto my fore-paws an' a he-haw stuck in my thrapple!" snorted another disgusted citizen of Small Hopes.

Possibly what had once been a man, but now a grim, unsavory caricature; ragged, greasy, bold yet timid, retiring yet thrusting itself forward, giving the impression of one who expected to receive a kick where he asked for a sixpence.

In one word, a bummer, of the variety seen in its perfection only in a mining town.

He stood just inside of Billy's Bower, evidently ready to beat a hasty retreat through the swinging doors in case his bodily health should demand such decisive action. His left hand held a peculiar looking instrument with one end touching his muffled throat, while his right feebly flourished a rude combination of wood and horsehair.

On one foot was a ragged arctic; on the other a heavy cowhide boot, wonderfully run over at the heel and gaping wide at the toes. Above them, a pair of trousers, more dirt and grease than woolen or cotton—more rags than either. A bit of frayed rope held the fluttering fragments about his waist. A shirt, open at the throat and wrists through lack of buttons, and a rimless, half-crownless remnant of a felt hat completed the wardrobe of this wandering minstrel.

His beard was full, thick and shaggy. His hair hung in tangled locks to his shoulders, coarse and weather-bleached, both being of a peculiar foxy-gray hue.

But little of his features could be seen save his eyes, which were bright, shifting rapidly from face to face, with the peculiar, frightened air which a dog shows when suddenly finding itself in strange and dubious company, and his nose. A nose well enough shaped in itself, but prominent and brightly colored enough to serve as a danger signal on a railway!

An apologetic grin divided its shaggy beard as he ducked his head and scraped the ragged arctic across the sanded floor in recognition of the general attention his Orphean strain had attracted. The rude bow cut a graceful figure through the smoky atmosphere, then came in contact with the—violin?

As the troubadour was a human being, so this cigar-box body, straight pine stick neck, and wonderfully-knotted strings was a violin. And if it contained little music, it lacked nothing in the matter of noise!

Another diabolical wail, and then the troubadour, clearing his husky throat and striking an attitude, sung:

"You're gazing now on Old Tom Moore,
A relic of bygone days;
And a bummer, too, they call me now—
But what care I for praise?
For my heart is fill'd with the days of old,
And oft I do repine,
For the days of old, the days of gold,
The days of '49!"

A doleful sigh broke from his laboring chest, as he draw bow across the strings with a trembling movement that awoke an echo lugubrious enough to draw tears of envy from the eyes of a moon-sick cur. Then, in a tone that fitly corresponded, he said:

"One of the 'riginal Argonauts, gents, though you mebbe won't think it, jes' to look at the remnant afore ye. One o' them as sot out to corral the golden fleece in '49. My sheer come to a few lonesome bristles from the leanest rail-splitter porcine in the drove!"

"Then—I was chirp an' chipper as the best. I could step as high as a string-halt hoss in the last stages! My proboscis turned up of its own accord at anythin' less than five goose-aigs with a fat figger at the head. Dust might be good enough fer common trash, but I wouldn't stoop over fer gold that I couldn't pick up with my eyes shet."

"Now—look at me, gents!"

Those last five words contained a sermon in themselves, and the "Relic" appeared to realize that fact. For a moment he stood with outstretched arms, then turned slowly around on his heel. A laugh followed, but he did not appear to hear it. Another tortured wail, and again his husky voice was heard:

"I had comrades then, a saucy crew—
Hard cases, I must confess—
But still I found them brave and true,
And square men as the best.
They'd stand the pinch and never flinch,
And never fret nor whine,
But like good old bricks, they stood the kicks,
In the days of '49!"

"An' kicks come a heap sight more plenty then halfpence, too, now I tell ye! Figger'tively speakin', in course. The kicks o' bad luck an' crooked fortune; not human kicks fer one o' the glorious Argonauts! Nary time! Kick a hunk o' dynamite ef you want to git off easy; but keep your old boots away from the rudder of a hero o' '49!"

"There was Poker Bill, he was one of the boys;

He was always in for a game;
And whether Bill lost or whether he won,
It was always to him the same.
He would ante a slug, or rush the buck,
Or go a hat-full blind;
But in a game with Death, poor Bill lost his breath,
In the days of '49!"

"Nerve? Now you are talking, gents! Grittier then a grindstone, an' chuck fuller o' sand then a fowl's gizzard, Bill was, them days! His cradle was made out o' keerds, an' he cut his teeth on poker chips. Afore he knowed how to walk, he bluffed his pap out o' house an' home on a bobtail flush!

"When I knowed him, a glazier's di'mon' couldn't make a mark on Bill's face, an' the oldest sport wouldn't know whether he was bettin' his pile on four aces or on'y six-spot high. Didn't I see it with my own two lookin' eyes, that time at Hangtown? Didn't they hev to cut a hole through the ruff to make room fer the stakes on the table? An' when Bill bluffed off the biggest glutton in the circle, didn't the lad jes' show up a runty six-high? To l'arn 'em how to play the unlimited, ye understand, gents!"

"The boys didn't 'call' him that turn, but they did later. Called Bill up higher, as too good fer this low sphere; sent him a line, ye know. He flew high that deal, did Bill, but he'd gone still higher ef the rope hedn't jammed on the limb!"

"There was Monte Pete, I'll ne'er forget,
For the luck he always had;
He'd deal for you both night and day,
Or as long as he had a scad.
One night a pistol laid him low—
'Twas his last 'lay-out,' in fine—
For it caught Pete sure, right 'dead in the door,'
In the days of '49!"

"A chief with the Spanish keerds was Monte, but like the common run o' Greasers, he hated water, inside or out; on'y fer that, I reckon he'd bin dealin' till yit.

"Ye see, one evenin' jes' afore business hours, he had a few words with his woman, an' they parted. She tuck it mighty hard, I reckon; anyway, when they found her, her heart was split clean open. An' Pete—waal, he was dealin' fer a right smart chance of oro, when he see the wrong keerd—fer him—was comin' out. 'Course he tried to slip it, but a bit o' blood on his thumb stuck to it long enough fer Snap-shot Sam to ketch onto the raffle, an' Pete went to jine comp'ny with his gal!"

"There was Gallus Jake, a butcher boy,
So fond of getting tight,
And whenever Jake got on a spree,
He was sp'ilin' for a fight.
One night he ran against a knife,
In the hands of Old Bob Kline;
So over Jake we held a wake,
In the days of '49!"

Oh, what a wail of agony came from the interior of that dirty, scratched and cracked cigar-box! And what a hollow echo from the wheezing lungs of the Relic! And the bristling beard was divided by the tip of a red tongue that moistened the hidden lips, rendered dry by the memory conjured up by that last couplet!

The bright eyes roved swiftly over the assembly of amused citizens, then turned lingeringly, wistfully toward the neat display of glasses and bottles behind the polished counter.

A bland smile curved the red lips of Billy Ullman as he leaned gracefully against the bar, and there was a humorous twinkle in his bold blue eyes as he read aright—who could help it?—that wordless appeal of the musical bummer.

He partially turned and grasped a full decanter. His assistant deftly slung him a glass along the bar, in a curve that ended exactly where the glass would meet the bending lips of the cut-glass bottle.

And how brightly the eyes of the bummer began to sparkle as he saw the liquor slowly trickling into the glass! How deftly he freed his right hand, how gracefully he stroked his shaggy beard, how politely, obsequiously he scraped his rubber-clad foot, while his lips smacked audibly in delicious anticipation!

"Bein' it's you, my dear sir, I don't mind ef—good Land!"

Billy raised the glass to his own lips, then put it down empty, smiling more blandly than ever as the Relic broke off in his fawning speech with a wretched groan.

"Carved, was he? Well, that's what I call the poetical whickness of the somewhat! Bein' a butcher, Jake lived by the knife, and so—you see, eh?"

The Relic shook his head slowly, smiling faintly.

"I thought I did, but I don't—wuss luck! Jes' a nightmare, I reckon, though fer one brief, delicious instant I could 'a' tuck my davy I see afore me one o' the thousan' glasses o' budge that we punished at the wake we held over Jake, that night at Fiddletown—mebbe the ghost o' the one I kin remember pourin' down the back o' Soap McAdoo as he tumbled under the table whar Jake was sleepin' his last sleep! Ah's me! Them what hes too much kin throw away, but them that ain't got nothin' cain't lose, on'y in thar 'magination!"

The Relic tucked his fiddle under his chin and gave a preliminary flourish of his bow in the air, as though about to resume his song; but with a tragic start he glanced swiftly about him, then, with a dingy finger touching his lips approached the bar, stepping high and walking on his toes. He stammered a little, then suddenly whispered in husky tones:

"I say, bo's, mebbe you wouldn't hev no great objections to blowin' your breath acrost my face, jes' once?"

A heart of frozen granite couldn't have resisted that appeal, and choking with laughter, Billy set out his best bottle and biggest glass. And had liquor cost double what it did, genial Billy would have felt amply repaid by the grateful glance, the humble bow, the trembling eagerness with which the Relic of '49 helped himself to the poison.

"Thar was a man I knowed back in '49," said the Relic, as he carefully filled the generous measure to the very brim, "who hed a way o' makin' sideboards o' his fingers when he thought a glass didn't hold enough—but I couldn't never ketch on to the trick. They was another who'd manidge to stretch out his neck to double len'th, an' so git twicet the averidge taste out o' his swizzle; but I never was lucky!"

"Gents all—an' you, boss, in partick'lar—I'm lookin' at ye! May this glorious 'casion happen 'long a heap more oftener then it hes o' late; the less seldomer ye do it over ag'in, the more on-likely I be to fergit how it tastes! as the old maid said to her fu'st sparkin'-machine!"

He lifted the brimming glass to his lips, and drank. Not in mad haste, as the ordinary bibber performs the action; but slowly, lingeringly, lovingly, his eyes uplifted and rolling in a dreamy languor that suggested dreams of endless bliss—the drink of an artist in drunkenness, even though a bummer!

"You'll never die by choking with a rope," laughed Billy Ullman, lightly, as the drained glass lingered beneath the red nose for a final sniff. "Not in this age of hurry, anyway!"

"I kin hold my breath double the len'th—ef you don't b'lieve it, jes' lend me the loan o' one o' them big bottles oncet tell I prove it!" eagerly cried the Relic.

Billy laughingly shook his head, and the Relic, with a forced laugh, fell back a little.

"Didn't I say it? Talk 'bout onluckfulness! Never yit did I hev four aces or a straight flush, with oro to back my 'pinion, but everybody throwed up thar han's 'thout a bet! Waal, sech is life in the Far West!"

By this time the card-tables in the long room beyond the bar proper, were almost entirely deserted, save by the faro-dealers and aides. The Relic was something out of the ordinary run, and promised sport not to be had every night.

The Relic saw this, and plainly scenting more liquor in the near future, he resumed his former position and once more awoke the doleful echoes with his rude bow.

The heavy dram he had taken seemed to be producing its desired effect. Certainly his elbow wagged more freely, and his rubber-clad foot sustained nearly his entire weight the better to enable his left foot to beat time. And if the rude fiddle was not inspired, it certainly gave forth even more frightful screeches and wails and groans than before.

Perhaps, had the music been less atrocious, the rough audience would sooner have tired of listening.

"There was Rattle-Jack Jim, who could outroar
A buffalo-bull, you bet!
Jim roared all night, and he roared all day,
And I believe he's roaring yet!
One night he fell in a prospect hole—
'Twas a roaring bad design—
For in that hole, Jim roared out his soul,
In the days of '49!"

"There was old Lame Jess, a mighty hard case,
And he never would repent;
Jess never missed a single treat,
Though he never put up a cent.
But poor old Jess, like all the rest,
Did at length to death resign;
For in his bloom, he went up the flume,
In the days of '49!"

"Of all the comrades I had then,
Not one remains to toast;
I'm left alone in my misery,
Like some poor wandering ghost!
Thesports all say that I'm a fraud,
And call me a traveling sign,
Saying 'There's old Tom Moore, a bummer sore,
Of the days of '49!'"

It was difficult to believe, even by those who looked on, but as the Relic drew near the close of his song, the harsh and grating sound left his voice, until it actually grew musical. And his homely violin no longer screeched and cater-wailed, but the hideous notes softened and grew more like music, though there was a sad, despairing sobbing in its subdued tones, as though it, in common with its master, was mourning over "the days of old."

Note:—The ballad here introduced, "The Days of '49!," it is hardly necessary to say, is not original with me. Who wrote it, I am unable to say. In the '70-ies, the popular comedian, "Ned Campbell," used to recite it in character. J. E. B., Jr.

The broadly smiling faces around the wandering troubadour lengthened, then began to grow darker as though their owners felt defrauded. Fun was all right, but sentiment—they must draw the line somewhere!

Possibly the Relic saw this change, and rightly interpreted it, though his own eyes seemed dim with unshed tears as he softly uttered the last refrain, for, without the slightest warning, the rude bow quivered across the knotted strings with a power that drew a fairly bloodcurdling screech of agony from the tortured instrument. So unexpected was the transition, so utterly hideous was the sound evoked, that steel-nerved men jumped back and uttered cries of surprise.

"What's the odds so long's one's happy?" laughed the Relic, slipping fiddle and bow through the rope that girded his loins. "A bummer? It's only a name, an' your nose'd blow jes' as easy ef you was to call it a pump-handle! Names can't blot out the mem'ry o' the days o' old, when Tom Moore the younger used fer to take his daily bath in champagne! Nur it can't make me fergit that I kin trace my pedigree straight back to Tom Moore, the fu'st—an' them what doubts my word, kin sot down an' hear me prove it by my skill on the fiddle! Music runs in the fambly, an' sometimes I'm ready to b'lieve that Glorious Tom left one shell on'y to crawl into another—an' right here you've got it, gents!" and he tapped his ragged bosom dramatically.

"Why not?" with a frown as he heard a mocking laugh from one who heard his modest claim. "Didn't he love wimmen an' wine—the tip-toppest of 'em all? Didn't he make songs, an' then sing 'em? Don't I do all two both? An' when I make the instrument what fetches out the inner music, as well, ain't I doin' even more then the fu'st Tom did? Be course I am!"

"Waal, what of it, anyhow? I'm a man, sech as you see me. I've hed my fling with the best. Ef I go throwed in the wrastle with poverty an' hard luck—ef I'm on'y a football fate, to be kicked hither an' yon—why, good whisky leaves as rich a taste in my throat as the biggest bug in the land!"

"Ef the time was when I could pave my walk with gold slugs, sech as we made in the days o' '49, while I can't rake up the price of a smell at a empty glass o' pizen now, do you reckon that misfortin'd hender me from hearin' any gent that keers to ax me will I indulge? Ef you think so, I calls on ye to put Old Tom to the test! Now's the time—an' don't all speak at the same minnit! Fer I stan' ready to give ye each gent a chance by his own self! Do I hear some-thin'?"

He did, most decidedly, and so did all of the other occupants of Billy's Bower; but it was very different from an invitation to drink.

A wild, piercing yell, and a huge missile of some sort crashed through the front window, falling like a ball to the floor, in their very midst!

CHAPTER II.

STORMY STEVE ON HIS HIGH HORSE.

The fragments of glass flew around in a sparkling shower and the broken sash clattered as it was flung across the floor, for the missile, of whatever nature it might be, had taken everything with it. Little wonder, then, that the men in Billy's Bower started back with cries of surprise and alarm.

The huge ball seemed to rebound as it struck the floor, rolling into the center of the open space before the bar, then, with a clear, ringing roar, the ball seemed to explode, the mass of rags flying in every direction, while a human figure shot upward, a swiftly revolving mass of glitter and bright color!

As the startled sports fell hastily back, it was but natural that their accustomed hands should seek the familiar weapons at their belts, and as the human catapult alighted once more on his feet, his bare arms folded across his swelling chest, his blazing blue eyes looked defiance into more than one dark muzzle. Instead of showing signs of fear, he seemed to invite their hasty lead.

"Now's your chance, gentlemen, while the cyclone pauses to fill its lungs! Get in your pretty work while you can, for when Stormy Steve gets fairly in motion, nothing short of a thunderbolt from the seventh heaven can phaze him! Pick trigger, and see your lead drop in harmless spray as it meets my balmy breath! Pull steel, and if red-hot lightning don't wither your fingers too quick for you to feel the shock, then I'm a stuffed club from parts where sawdust and tanbark, spangles and fleshings, are among the lost arts. Houp-la! and here we come again—twenty shows boiled down and concentrated into one, the great and only original Stormy Steve, the Human Cyclone!"

The swelling lungs gave out a roar that seemed almost capable of raising the roof, and the new-comer shot upward and backward, whirling over in the air, alighting on the counter without a perceptible jar. He stood like a cunningly-carved statue, the perfection of manly grace and muscularity.

Genial Billy Ullman had shared the surprise of his patrons when that startling crash came, and with the certain hand of one who had long since accustomed himself to act promptly and decisively when emergencies arose, he grasped a

revolver from its resting place beneath the bar. But now, instead of covering the audacious fellow whose flying heels almost grazed his curly locks as they descended upon the bar, he swept the frowning muzzle over the shrinking citizens, crying in a clear, business-like tone:

"Put up your tools, gentlemen, if you please, unless you want to dance to my music! This is my particular friend."

Perhaps this warning was not actually needed. There were those present who had met "Stormy Steve" before, when he was on one of his "cyclone tears," and the hardest, boldest man among them only asked to keep out of his way while in that mad mood. They were replacing their tools and edging back towards the walls, even before Billy uttered his stern warning.

Even those most apt to use their weapons among the few present who had neither heard of nor seen Stormy Steve, concluded that it would be better policy for them to put up their tools than to use them. Not only did Billy mean business from the word go, but that living statue—well, it was handsomer to look at than it would be to handle!

The very model for a perfect athlete, as a sculptor would have testified, had there been one present; the "sports" who were present, mentally summed him up as "a bad man from 'way back!"

Yet it was a figure difficult to paint in cold words, so as to convey an accurate idea of the man himself. There was the shapely head on a strong, broad-based neck that sloped with a curve into the massive shoulders; the deep, broad and muscular chest, with a bust almost as full as that of a woman, yet carrying no superfluous flesh, no "useless timber." There was the trim, yet powerful waist, the backbone lying hidden in a deep hollow between twin ridges of muscle; the swelling hips and long, sinewy thighs; the shapely calves and round ankles, fitting to high-arched feet. All this clothed in silken fleshings that seemed a second skin. A pair of royal purple trunks covered with silver and gold spangles; a collar and breastplate of the same material; these lent glitter and splendor to a form that was perfect without them.

His face was a strong, if not exactly handsome one, with marked features. His high forehead joined a bald expanse that reached to the occipital line, leaving but a fringe of short, silken, curling locks about his skull. His large eyes were blue as the noonday sky in summer, but held a stern, almost sullen fire as they stared steadily at the crowd. His nose was rather small, as to length, curved as the beak of an eagle. A drooping pair of mustaches, thick and heavy, gave only an occasional glimpse of the red, full lips beneath.

"Who and what is he?" asked a young man in a low tone of voice, partly turning his face toward the man he addressed, but without averting his gaze from that striking figure on the bar. "Can you tell me?"

"Stormy Steve, he calls himself. What he is, you'll be pretty apt to see before long, unless the boss sits down on him in sober earnest," was the dry reply of the faro-dealer, who was closely watching Billy Ullman. "That settles it!" he added, hastily sweeping the colored checks into a drawer and turning the key as Ullman uttered his warning for the crowd to go slow.

Milo Tyrwhite shrugged his shoulders a trifle. "One of your wild and woolly characters, I suppose?" he uttered, with a slight laugh; adding, more to himself than the professional whose table he had been modestly patronizing for an hour past: "Yet he is more than a blustering bully, or his face belies him!"

The black eyes of the dealer swept over that clear, healthy, handsome countenance, with something more than a professional interest, before he made reply:

"You're new to these parts, I take it?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Because you don't appear to have heard of Stormy Steve."

"Is he such a noted character, then?"

"Is he—well," with a significant shrug of the shoulders, "if you see him coming your way, on a cyclone tear, you want to give him at least one-half the road, and even then look out for a kick or a snap of the teeth as he passes! It isn't so very often he gets that way, but when he does, he's a holy terror from sundown!"

Before Milo Tyrwhite could make any reply to this hastily-muttered warning, Stormy Steve "broke out in a new place!"

Again came that resounding roar, reminding one of the grim challenge which a desert monarch sends forth of a stormy night to his rival lions, and the athlete leaped almost to the high ceiling, whirling over twice in the air as he descended.

He caught up a portion of the ragged garments which had enveloped his person and protected it from injury by the breaking glass. He took from it a broad and heavy belt of wash-leather, and turning, dropped it on the counter before Billy Ullman, saying:

"Act as my cashier, Charming Billy. Keep count and pay for the damage as we go along. And when the exchequer is bankrupt, bring forth your stuffed club and clear the ring!"

"It's all sound and fury, Steve? You're not

wolfish to-night? Not hankering for gore?" slowly asked Ullman.

"Mild as milk, Billy," with a genial laugh; but almost instantly the smile was swept away by a black and threatening frown, and the musical tones grew hard and harsh: "Unless a tornado comes along to buck against the cyclone—then stand from under, for it'll rain blood and hail human flesh!"

He paused and then whirled swiftly on one heel as a long-drawn lugubrious screech smote upon his hearing—a wail that would have caused the hair of the worst love-smitten cat in all the land to stand on end from pure envy!

Of course it came from the much-tortured fiddle of the Relic of '49, Old Tom Moore.

He had hastily scuffled away to one corner as Stormy Steve made his *entree*, and crouching there, seemingly lost in waking dreams of the past, his eyes closed, his fingers mechanically invoking the diabolical spirit that inhabited his instrument, he was espied by the athlete. One keen glance, then a shrill, far-reaching yell burst from those magnificent lungs, and a single leap carried him to the spot.

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Seemingly without the slightest effort, he grasped the Relic by the waist of his rags, lifting him clear of the floor and swinging him rapidly about his head with one hand.

"Good—Lawd!" gasped the luckless wretch, his arms and legs flopping around as though about to drop from his trunk. "Now I lay me down—ef I—on'y jes'—could!"

The last word came with a screech, for Stormy Steve, with a swift swaying of his body and a mighty heave, cast the Relic into the air so high that his heels struck the arched ceiling before he came plunging down with all the grace of a crippled bullfrog!

And then, deftly, and with seeming ease, the athlete caught him and saved him from broken bones, if no worse.

It was a truly marvelous exhibition of strength and cool nerve, and a cry of wondering delight ran through the crowd.

But Milo Tyrwhite frowned, his black eyes beginning to sparkle and glitter with anger and disgust.

"The big brute! Will no man interfere to save that poor old wretch from his tormentor?"

"The job's open for you, if it likes you, stranger," said Dave Forsee, the faro-dealer, with a sarcastic smile that, perhaps, it was just as well for both passed unseen by the hot-blooded youth beside him.

Stormy Steve, hugging the breathless bummer to his broad bosom much as a loving mother soothes a frightened child, turned to the nearest table and dropped his prize upon it.

Dizzy, breathless from that mad whirl in mid-air, the Relic had barely time to dimly realize that there was something substantial beneath his body, when another ordeal began.

The table was one of the sort ordinarily used in saloons for card-playing; round-topped, without leaves or drawers, substantially made of inch stuff, with four strong legs.

Stormy Steve stooped and grasped two of the legs in his hands, tilting the top of the table toward him. The Relic gave a muffled howl as he felt his resting-place give a warning heave and quiver, and clasping his precious fiddle to his ragged bosom with one hand, he clung to the edge of the table with the other, glaring dizzily around the room as though in search of aid.

But no one stepped forward to interfere. What was bitter as death to the poor devil was but sport to them.

Swiftly, steadily the table with its trembling burden rose in the air until Stormy Steve stood erect. The great cords of sinew and bunches of hard muscle stood out on his magnificently-developed arms, writhing and quivering; but there was no other sign that his truly marvelous powers were being strained or even brought into full play. His face was unflushed, his breathing free and calm, and there was a laughing devil in his big blue eyes.

Higher yet rose the heavy table with its burden. Up until the two white hands passed the level of their owner's head. A brief pause, a slight shifting of the body, a gentle and deliberate tilting of the table until the left arm was at full length above his head. Then it relaxed its grasp, and Stormy Steve held the entire weight by the grip of a single hand!

It was a wonderful exhibition, rendered all the more remarkable from the fact that the Relic, evidently fearing a fall from the card-polished table-top, kept as close to the higher and outer edge of the table as he possibly could.

A single breath thus, then Stormy Steve flung back his head, protruding his square chin. On this he rested the leg of the table, the Relic uttering a trembling squeal as his foundation tilted more than ever. A moment—then his hands dropped to his bosom, crossing over his swelling bust, and he began a slow, regular waltz about the bar-room as he dexterously maintained the balance of his human-laden table.

Despite his disgust at the scene, Milo Tyrwhite could not help muttering:

"What a magnificent—brute!"

Dave Forsee caught the words and smiled faintly as he more closely scrutinized the stranger. He seemed about to address him when a cry broke from the spectators.

Stormy Steve paused in the center of the open space before the bar, steadying the table for a moment. Then—just how the feat was performed, not one who so eagerly watched the peculiar drama could have explained—the table was cast to one side, the Relic was toppled from his perch, to drop harmlessly into those powerful arms. And before he could utter a cry of either fright or anger, he was dumped on the polished bar, his legs astride of it, and at a sign from Stormy Steve, the bartender was offering him one of the largest decanters!

"Let the band play, master of the ring!" placidly ejaculated Stormy Steve, unflushed, seemingly as cool and fresh as though he had been indulging in nothing more than the gentlest exercise.

Mechanically the Relic placed his fiddle in position and feebly flourished his rude bow. It seemed as though he was dazed by what had occurred. But then, as the barkeeper removed the stopple from the decanter, and suffered the aroma to escape, to ascend to the nostrils of the old-timer, down dropped fiddle and bow, unheeded.

"Fer me? the hull on it?" he gasped, dizzily.

"If you can surround it, sure," laughed the waiter.

"It's another o' them durned dreams!" muttered the bummer, but grasping the decanter with both hands. "It feels like a bottle, an' smells like the pure quill—but I jes' know it's a dream! Durn the odds! an' my biggest cuss onto the critter as wakes me out o' sech a heavenly dream!"

Gingerly, carefully, like one fearing to break a delicious spell by a rash or hurried movement, the Relic drew his left leg over the counter and slid down behind the bar, disappearing from the sight of the laughing crowd.

Stormy Steve laughed with the rest, and seemed a good-natured fellow enough, just then. But, though his tones were moderate enough and even musical as he spoke, his countenance bold, frank and smiling, there was a burning fire in his eyes that served to warn the more observing.

"Gentlemen, all! I'm Stormy Steve, and I'm out on a cyclone jamboree to-night. I'm the Worst Pill in the Box, warranted to cure or to kill, according to how I'm taken. Coat me over with blind faith, swallow me without chewing, and I'll do you as much good as I taste sweet. Crack the sugar coating, sink your teeth into me, stop to taste what I'm made of, and you'll wish you'd never been brought into this world!"

"Some of you may have heard of me, even if we have never met in the flesh before, but there are others who may need a more thorough introduction. Billy, my charmer, will you act as ringmaster for a bit?"

"Money talks straighter than I can, and here's the ducats plain enough," laughed Ullman, as he opened the heavy belt and shook out its contents. There were single and double eagles of gold, and a roll of bills of large denominations. With a deft flirt of his white fingers, Billy revealed the figures to the eager and interested crowd, who had gradually drawn closer to the bar.

Billy swept the wealth from the counter, depositing it on the shelf behind him, as he once more faced the crowd.

"Stormy Steve is my friend, and white clean through. When he goes on a tear, he begins like a gentleman of the purest water; he puts up his money beforehand, and don't make a poor devil wear his mind out debating whether to invite sudden death by trying to bounce him, or go into bankruptcy if he should fail to collect his little bill of damages—not any!"

"He's mild as new cheese, is Stormy Steve, providing you give him a clear course. If he should happen to hurt any of you, by accident—for he's no milk for babes, now I tell ye!—you've only got to set your own figures, and he'll make you whole, though it takes the coat from his back. This, if an accident comes through mischance. If you cut up rusty—if you try to puncture his boiler, or sit too long on the safety valve—well, maybe you'd get scalded!"

"Good enough, gentlemen, but not precisely what I wished to convey," put in the athlete, as Billy paused to catch his breath. "I'm a curious animal. I've been red-hot and boiling over ever since I can first remember. It's a marvel to me that I've escaped the gallows this long; not that I'm deliberately evil, for I'm not; but there's a devil inside twice as big and ten times as strong as I am! It keeps struggling to get the best of me, and if I didn't let it have full swing once in a while—if I didn't let go all holds and turn out for a cyclone tear—I'd find myself running a-muck, sure!"

"In other words, Stephen Hasbrook is a gentleman. Stormy Steve is the Worst Pill in the Box! And I'm Stormy Steve, with a cyclone up each sleeve, just now!"

"Billy, my dove, poison these gentlemen, and

take it out of the treasury. And a bottle of your hottest pepper for me!"

There are few citizens of a mining-camp who are not able and willing to drink when invited, and fewer still who would care to needlessly irritate a man of Stormy Steve's caliber by declining such an invitation. So it was natural enough for the bar to be quickly lined with customers, who kept the nimble-handed assistant busy for a few moments in supplying their wants. As for Billy, he only served Stormy Steve, placing before him a seal bottle of champagne.

The athlete waited patiently until all glasses were charged. He bowed in acknowledgment as the sports nodded toward him before swallowing their liquor. Then—with a quick snap of his strong teeth, aided by a peculiar turn of the wrist, he *bit off the neck of the bottle!*

A little murmur of amazement ran through the gathering, but Stormy Steve paid no attention to this. He drained the bottle without stopping for breath, then uttered his wild roar as he shot up from the floor, turning a somersault and hurling the empty bottle from him while revolving.

It barely missed Billy Ullman's head, then crashed into the plate-glass mirror behind the bar, shattering the pride of Billy's Bower into a thousand pieces.

"I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!" rung out his wild slogan, as he struck the floor. "Houp-la! steam's up, and the patent cyclone begins its twisting! Hunt your storm-caves, ye men of little faith! Crawl into your holes and throw away the entrance! And you that haven't got either, grab a root and hold on for dear life!"

Into the air he shot again, the bright light flashing from his spangles with a thousand scintillations. Over and over he whirled, until it made one's head swim to watch his intricate evolutions.

Milo Tyrwhite sat beside the faro-table watching the free exhibition, his first disgust giving place to admiration for the almost marvelous skill displayed by this strange man.

He was no mean athlete himself, for it seemed to "run in the family," and he could better judge of the skill displayed than most persons. He felt that he beheld a marvel—one man in a million.

But not long was Stormy Steve content with this unadorned display. As he said, the devil of destruction seemed in him and must out.

Again that wild slogan, and rising high into the air, he whirled over and alighted feet foremost on top of one of the tables provided for the accommodation of short-card parties.

With a crash the table gave way beneath his weight, strewing the floor with splinters, bringing a general cry of alarm from the wondering spectators, who could not help believing serious harm must come to the daring, reckless "Human Cyclone."

Far from it. Stormy Steve dexterously escaped the wreck, and with a longer, higher bound, he whirled in mid-air and descended upon the next table. Another ruin—another deft escape, and the crowd turned eyes upon Billy Ullman to see how he would take this wanton destruction. He leaned carelessly upon the bar, smiling genially at his reckless patron, evidently quite content.

Again and again did Stormy Steve whirl high and strike his slippered feet upon tables, shattering them to bits without injury to himself, until there was not a round table left whole in the house. He paused, erect, his face flushed, his big blue eyes glowing like coals of living fire. Surely he must be satisfied now, and—ha!

Another tremendous leap—a glitter of spangles—a crash—and the faro-table went to wreck and ruin!

It was the one beside which Milo Tyrwhite sat, and he had all he could do to save himself from harm in the wreck. And as he rose erect, Stormy Steve stood before him, laughing!

Then, swift as thought, a tight-clinched fist shot out and struck the "Human Cyclone" in the face with a sharp crack!

CHAPTER III.

SNAPPING AT A GOLDEN LURE.

"If I could be sure—if I could even guess—curse the fellow! why don't he show up! Why don't he at least give some sign to prove it more than a vile hoax?"

"Really, I'll have to give it up, father!"

Jason Verner was striding rapidly to and fro in what might, since there certainly was no other with a better claim to the title in the building, be called the parlor of Deacon Patmore's hotel, the "Sanctuary."

Tall, gaunt, bony-framed and hard-featured after the Scottish type, he was not a man from whom such a passionate outburst would naturally be expected. He looked more like an honest Shylock; like one who would carefully keep on the sunny side of the law, even while rigidly exacting his pound of flesh. A grim, uncompromising honesty seemed to stick out all over him—and to have each point fire-tempered and sharp as the quills of a fretful porcupine. One whom a business man might trust

with unlimited gold; but no close student of human nature would care to place a tender heart in his custody.

Not a loving nor a lovable man, one would say, yet as he turned quickly toward the one who uttered that quiet interjection, his corrugated brow smoothed, his hard eyes softened with a light that plainly told he could love and love powerfully.

"I beg your pardon, father, for my impudence," uttered Cedora Verner, with a dainty, bubbling laugh that was music itself. "But you did look so doleful—so utterly wretched—so eaten up with impatient longing and suspense. And then, you were beginning to talk aloud, to yourself. And—I really think it is time that I knew what all this mystery portends!"

Her daintily-penciled brows came closer together in a frown that was plainly forced, flatly belied by the merry light that danced in her blue eyes.

Jason Verner smiled as he looked and listened. He would have been more or less than human had he refused some such tribute to the playful, kittenish arts of the little lady, even though she was his daughter, instead of a lady-love.

"You are right, child," he said, as he sunk into the chair which he had so suddenly deserted to take up that fast, impatient pacing back and forth a few minutes earlier. "You are right. It is time you knew more about the mystery, as you see fit to term it—and mystery it is, too—worse luck!"

There was no smile in his face now. He bent over in his chair until a bony knee afforded support to a still sharper elbow. His arm was curved until his thumb met his lips, and as his hard gray eyes stared moodily across the room at vacancy, his teeth were gnawing at his thumb-nail. His other arm was at a sharp angle, his bony fingers tightly gripping his thin leg. He seemed to forget that he was not alone, as well as his implied promise to throw light on the mystery.

And as she sat watching him, the smile faded from that fair young face, and a cold chill began to creep over her body as wild fancies came flocking into her brain.

Jason Verner and his daughter, Cedora, were recent arrivals at the mining-camp known as Small Hopes, reaching it for the first time but little more than four-and-twenty hours before they are introduced to the reader. They came by stage—the only alternative was to walk or to ride a burro—and as a matter of course "put up" at the only "hotel" in town. There were several lodging places—boarding-houses, where homeless wanderers were "taken in and done for" after a certain fashion—but only the one hotel. That was a plain, unpainted, unornamented building of two stories in height, hastily erected after a slipshod fashion, with an eye to the immediate needs, rather than the future. It gloried in the name of "The Sanctuary," and Deacon Patmore was its prophet.

The Deacon had a keen eye for his own interests, and at a single glance he set Jason Verner down as an "angel" with golden feathers, and nothing in the house was too good for him from the first moment his feet crossed the threshold. He was given the best chambers in the house, and the "parlor" was tabooed to all save Jason and his fair daughter.

Jason Verner should have been both proud and happy, for the Deacon seldom took so much trouble to please his guests; a man needed a full pocket and careless fingers if he wished to see Deacon Patmore at his best; but he certainly was neither, if his looks be accepted as evidence.

He was restless as a fish out of water, though he had not once crossed the threshold since first entering the Sanctuary. He strode to and fro, glancing out of the dingy windows or through the open door, seemingly looking for some one who came not. His naturally hard, stern face grew even less agreeable as time crept by without the coming of that unnamed personage. And as the second evening grew older, his impatience finally broke through all barriers and he uttered the words recorded at the head of this chapter—the first allusion he had made to the real object of his hurried journey from their far-off home.

And Cedora caught at the opportunity with a playfulness that only thinly disguised her real anxiety to learn something of the truth. She knew so little—she suspected so much!

For some little time she sat watching him in silence, fighting down those cruel, haunting doubts. Hard and rigid though he had proved himself to the world, only in one instance had he turned this side of himself upon her. She knew that he was very proud of her; that he loved her as such men rarely love even their own flesh and blood. Until recently she had believed him the very personification of truth and honor. She told herself over and over again that she still believed—she must, she would believe! And yet—there was a tinge of fear and reserve in her manner even when she essayed to be the most playful, when she sought to amuse him by her old-time childish freaks and coquetry. Even he felt this, and seemed to grow harder and grimmer.

Now—Cedora stole silently to his side, steal-

ing one little hand into his as the strong teeth gnawed at his thumb-nail. She shrunk a trifle as he abruptly turned toward her, but her tones were playful as she uttered:

"I just dote on mystery, father—when I know just what its ingredients are! Come! you promised, and a Verner never breaks—"

She broke off abruptly, her cheeks paling, a pained light coming into her blue eyes, for she knew that a Verner had broken a promise given; and well-nigh broken her heart in so doing, too!

Jason Verner frowned darkly, for he read her thoughts correctly. Perhaps it was this that made him comply so promptly. Perhaps he felt it best to give her other matter for reflection.

He arose and led her to a chair near the little table at one side of the room, drawing a seat for himself at the opposite end. He drew a note-book from an inner pocket, opening it and running over the documents therein with practiced fingers until he found the one he needed.

Cedora watched him silently. Her red lips were tightly compressed. Her face was pale, save for the twin spots of hectic color that marked her cheeks. There was an anxious light in her eyes that told of a heart ill at ease.

"You shall know all that I know, child," said Jason Verner, his tones hard and metallic. "You should have known before, had I been certain it was not a shameful hoax."

"You are certain now?"

"No! I only wish I were!"

He opened the letter, hastily glanced over the closely-written lines as though to make sure it was the right paper, tossed it across the table, then sunk back in his chair, gnawing his nail with that peculiar, fierce, yet sullen air.

Cedora felt that he was watching her closely as she took the paper. Her fingers trembled slightly, but with a portion of her father's stern will, she kept a mask over her face as she glanced at the opening lines.

From its intimate connection with this story, the letter is produced in full.

"SMALL HOPES, COL., June 4th, '79.

"JASON VERNER, ESQ., BOSTON, MASS.,
"SIR:—If, with your customary craftiness, you glance first at the signature below, think twice before you cast this aside without a thorough perusal and careful consideration. You may hate the writer—your past actions have plainly shown this—but you love gold, and it is gold that I offer you now.

"When you saw me last, you predicted that I would either die in a poorhouse or perish upon the gallows. As yet I have escaped both evils—possibly because you predicted them. I was ever contrary, you know!

"Instead, I have made my fortune. I have more gold than a dozen spendthrifts could scatter in a lifetime. There is more in easy reach—enough for all my friends, with a little extra for my enemies.

"Whether friend or enemy, you are still a relative. The same blood flows in our veins. And, after all is said and done, blood is thicker far than water!

"Years have come and gone since those days when you and I quarreled so outrageously; time enough for the memory to grow faint, even if it cannot die entirely away. I still remember them, though with naught of malice. Clearer by far I can recall the mild, tender eyes of aunt Mary, your wife! And when I think of her, somehow, I wish that you and yours might have a share in the wonderful good fortune which has befallen me of recent years.

"With this hope, I address you. I ask you to come out here and take a look around you. I ask you to come and meet one who, though a scapegrace in those old days, is yet your blood relative. And then, if you can bow your stiff neck enough to accept a share of my good luck, it is heartily at your service.

"The same mail that carries this letter to you, takes another to my younger brother, Milo. I give him much the same information, and precisely the same advice. I bid him lose no time in coming out here. I tell him that you have received the same invitation. To him, as to you, I say that there must be no communication between you, no consultation on this point. You—and he—must accept or reject of your own free will.

"If you come, put up at the hotel known as 'The Sanctuary,' and kept by Deacon Patmore. I will find you there, soon after your arrival.

"If you decline this invitation, honest and sincere, if a trifle blunt—you not only lose a nephew forever, but you lose a fortune that, rich though you are, will double and treble your present bank account. A word to the wise, you know; and even in the days when we detested each other the most heartily, I never called or believed you a fool!

"Yours, as you may elect,

"ALBUS TYRWWHITE."

It was a peculiar letter, and as she slowly read it, Cedora Verner felt that it admirably suited the character which she had heard given the wild cousin whom she had never seen.

It was blunt, yet with a certain trace of earnestness in its composition that shadowed forth a generous, kindly nature.

"Well, what do you think of it, child?" demanded Jason Verner, his teeth showing a little through his thin lips.

Cedora hesitated, apparently finding it difficult to select the proper words for a reply.

"It seems earnest and kind, yet—"

"You think it a hoax?"

"No, sir," promptly enough. "At first glance it seems careless and heartless, but there are traces of a true, kindly, generous heart between the lines. I believe he means what he says; that

he wishes you to share the good fortune which has befallen him; but—"

"But what?" impatiently.

"He is the boy who ran away from home, rather than—who refused to apologize, when his father bade him?"

"Who told you anything like that?" demanded Verner, his shaggy gray brows drawing together, his hard face growing still harder.

"Bah! of course it was that idle-tongue, Milo!" The girl shrunk back, her face pale as death, a pained look in her dimming eyes. She made no reply; perhaps because the charge was founded on truth.

Still frowning, Jason Verner produced another paper from his note-book, and slowly read it aloud. It bore an earlier date than the other, but had been mailed at the same office. It was addressed to a legal firm well known in Boston, and opened with inquiries regarding Jason Verner and Milo Tyrwhite. Then, in explanation, came the lines:

"My reasons for asking these questions are as follows:

"Milo Tyrwhite is my younger brother; Jason Verner married my father's only sister. I believe that these two men, with their families, if they are married and have children, are my sole living relatives.

"I have lost sight of them for many years, during which fortune has favored me highly. I am very rich. I have more money than I know what to do with, unless it can be used to build up the old name again, and to make the family a power in the land.

"For personal reasons, which would not interest you, I prefer not to hunt my relatives up in person. If you can discover them, do so. Write me fully concerning their position in life, omitting no detail which you think would be of interest to a relative who wishes to benefit them. Send me what particulars you can gather, together with your bill, and, etc."

"By a curious chance, the application was made to my own lawyers," said Jason Verner, folding the papers and carefully stowing them away in his note-book. "Of course they at once notified me, and asked my instructions. I gave them after due consideration. The firm investigated the matter before they wrote in answer to the letter of inquiry."

"And they discovered—what?"

"That at least there was a foundation of fact to build upon. They learned of rich and productive mines owned by a comparatively young man named Albus Tyrwhite. They found out he was considered a millionaire, at least in mining circles, where he must be well known. But that was all. They failed to find the man. He had gone off on a trip somewhere, no one seemed to know exactly where. Their agent asked for further instructions. They came to consult me. I satisfied myself that they were satisfied all was as he represented, then bade them answer the letter, giving the information sought. You see the result."

Jason Verner tapped the note-book containing the letter, then placed it in an inner pocket.

"There was another note to the firm, in answer to the letter they sent him. I haven't got it with me, but I remember its purport.

"He thanked them for their prompt attention, inclosing a check for their trouble. He said that he had written to his relatives, and trusted they would respond favorably. He felt a curious presentiment of early death, and wished to secure their happiness before it was fulfilled—the crackbrain!"

"You call him that, father? yet you are here in answer to his generous appeal!" exclaimed Cedora, flushing with shame.

Her father laughed shortly, hardily, as he replied:

"Yes, I am here—but where is Albus Tyrwhite? Why does he not come to welcome the relatives whom he holds so dear? Why? Because this is only another spiteful stroke at me, whom he hated almost before he could walk alone! Because he has made a consummate idiot of me—me! And even now he may be quietly watching us and laughing in his sleeve at the silly gudgeons who have snapped so greedily at his golden lure!"

"Greedily, indeed!" murmured Cedora, hiding her hot face. "If I had even suspected this, father, I would have starved rather than take the first step toward this place! It is shameful—humiliating indeed!"

"If a hoax, I grant that," snapped the father, rising and striding hurriedly to and fro. "And it is a hoax—I can feel it in my bones! Curses on the impudence of Satan's own! Curses on my folly in thinking that good could come out of evil! They are bad—rotten to the very core—those Tyrwhites. Not a decent drop ever flowed in their veins!"

Cedora lifted her head, her face pale as death, but growing stern and faintly like his own as she exclaimed:

"Father, you forget! The same blood flows in my veins, and in cursing it you are cursing me! More—my sainted mother was a Tyrwhite!"

"And she was the only decent one among the whole tribe—the exception that proves the rule," he growled, sourly as ever, but in a more subdued tone.

It was clear that this rebuke had touched him sharply. Besides his daughter, his wife had

been the only woman who had ever touched his heart, for his mother died young and he never had a sister.

There was silence between them for a time. Jason Verner slowly moderated his rapid striding, until at length he stood motionless, his left hand supporting his right elbow, his teeth gnawing at his thumb-nail after his fashion when puzzled.

Cedora believed him softened, and this emboldened her to approach a subject which haunted her night and day.

"And—father—do you think that—that Mr. Tyrwhite has come on the same errand?"

"You mean Milo Tyrwhite, of course?" snapped Jason, sourly.

Cedora timidly nodded. Her eyes were lowered to the floor, and she knew not whether her parent was looking at her or had his face still averted. Still, he understood her silence, and his tones grew harsher and more savage than ever, as he said:

"Of course—the scoundrel! He wants gold, the better to sow a fresh crop of wild oats!"

"You are sure there was no mistake, father?"

"Mistake? In our first estimation of the rascal? Of course, there was a mistake—a terrible mistake! Lucky that my eyes were opened to the truth before it was too late!"

"Even yet I can hardly bring myself to believe it!" the maiden murmured, her blue eyes swimming in bitter tears, her voice low, trembling, half-choked. "He seemed so noble, so true, so frank and generous-hearted!"

"And played his hypocritical part so adroitly that it would have deceived an angel right from Heaven!" was the bitter interjection. "Not a drop of honest blood ever flowed in Tyrwhite veins, or—"

"My mother, father!" proudly repeated Cedora.

"Except her, and through her, you, my pet," and the father turned to clasp his child in his arms, his face growing strangely soft, his tones sounding almost musical. "Yet, dear as you are to me, little one, if I could I would open your veins and let out every drop of the black blood that comes from that treacherous race! I hated them ever, but since that day when the cunning mask dropped from over the face of Milo Tyrwhite, I have hated the very name a thousand fold more intensely! I shall ever hate it—ever hate all who bear the name!"

"Yet you have come so many miles in obedience to the request of a Tyrwhite!" impulsively exclaimed the maiden.

"Not through love—or, if love, you inspired it, child," he said, his voice grave and earnest as his thin hand caressingly passed over her silken hair. "I thought I saw a chance to make more money, to increase the little store that will be yours, one of these days, child."

"Money!" with a scornful outflinging of one white hand. "You are rich enough now, father."

"So all men think, save myself, child. I am not rich—far from it! If not poor, I can leave you but a modest store when I am called away."

"Don't, father! It hurts me to hear you talk like that!"

"And it hurts me, too, child, because I cannot leave you in better circumstances; and this is why I tried to have faith in that strange letter—why I crushed down my hatred of the bare name of Tyrwhite, and came out to this barbarous region."

"I hoped it was true and reliable. I hoped to gain more gold—not for myself. I am growing old, and cannot expect to last much longer. If I plot and scheme for gold, little one, remember I do so for your good. You are all I have on earth, now—all that makes life dear and sweet! And, Cedora, whatever of pain I have given you during your short life, never forget that I sincerely believed it all for your own good!"

He bent his head and pressed a warm kiss upon her brow, then gently loosened her clinging arms, putting her from him.

"I am going out for a little walk in the fresh air, child. I will not be gone very long, but don't sit up for me. Go to bed, and forget your fancied sorrows in happy dreams."

He caught up his hat from the table, and hastily left the room, without a backward glance at the silently weeping girl.

CHAPTER IV.

"THE WORST PILL IN THE BOX!"

It was a blow such as no novice in the "manly art" could deliver: a straight shot from the shoulder, backed up by the weight of the upper body, though none but the initiated could have told this, so swift was the blow, so slight the seeming exertion which accompanied it. Yet the contact of fist and face gave a sound almost as sharp and clear as the crack of a whip.

The instant his blow was delivered, Milo Tyrwhite leaped back a pace, his hands up and forming a guard graceful as it was effective. Though he had acted on the impulse of the moment, he was prepared to meet the consequence; and this he began to suspect would be far more serious than he had calculated on.

He saw the red blood trickling from the cut his knuckles had made, but he had expected more than that. Until that moment he did not

believe the man lived who could receive a blow of that quality without being staggered, even if he could retain his feet, coming so swift and unexpectedly. But Stormy Steve was not knocked down. He was not even shaken by the savage thrust. If his head went back even a single inch, it was so quickly recovered that even his trained eyes could not be certain.

The Human Cyclone stood before him, gracefully poised, just as he cleared the wreck of the faro-table. His arms were folded across his swelling bosom. There was a smile upon his face. Nothing like anger—not even a touch of surprise.

That sharp and spiteful crack was echoed back by short cries of excited wonder, not unmixed with fear and pity as the citizens realized what had occurred. And as Milo Tyrwhite gazed in amazement into that smiling, blood-marked face, more than one hand dropped to pistol-butt or knife-hilt.

"Go slow, gentlemen!" cried Billy Ullman, his voice sharp and wicked, his white hands coming armed above the bar. "I'm taking this thing in, and as long as it's only man to man, none of you want to chip in. You *sabe*?"

"Stormy Steve'll chaw him up 'thout pepper or salt!"

"An' spit him through a knot-hole!"

"It's like a full-grown man licking a kid!"

"A banty 'g'inst a shanghai! But he's pure game, the little cuss—rary out-cross *thar*, you bet!"

These ejaculations might have been caught from among the many which broke from the spectators as they saw how boldly Milo Tyrwhite awaited the consequences; but of them all, not one ventured to interfere further. Stormy Steve was not the man to be lightly crossed, and he had a hard backer in Ullman.

Neither of the twain most intimately concerned cast a single glance in that direction. They stood, just beyond arm's-length, face to face, eyes meeting eyes, forming a striking tableau. Thus for full half a minute, then a hard, metallic laugh parted the lips of the athlete, and he spoke:

"Did you *mean* it, stranger? Don't be in a hurry. Take plenty of time to be sure your answer is just what you mean. One slip may pass, but hardly a second one. I believe I ran against your fist; was it my fault, or yours?"

"Yours for deserving it—mine for not putting a little more steam behind it!" quickly uttered Tyrwhite.

"It was not an accident, then?"

"No more than your smashing that table was an accident. You did that to make a show of yourself. I struck you to show that there was at least one man in the room, if the rest are all cowards!" was the hot retort.

"And that man stands in your boots, of course?"

"You can convince yourself as to that, just as soon as the fancy takes you."

"Thanks!" with a mocking smile, his great eyes glowing with something more than simple amusement. "First, I crave a favor. You have a name?"

"I've written it on your face, in red ink. Shall I duplicate the signature?"

"If you can."

"On guard, then!"

Milo Tyrwhite, though he knew that his interests could be served best by perfect coolness and steadiness of nerve, had a difficult task in keeping his naturally hot, fiery temper in subjection during this rapid interchange of words.

By nature modest and unpretending, he detested anything like ostentation, and above all he loathed a bully. Though he could not refrain from feeling a certain degree of admiration for Stormy Steve, as an athlete, he despised the man as much as he respected the skill and daring displayed. He saw in him a marvel of muscular power and trained adroitness, but in his estimation, his value ended at that point.

In his treatment of the broken-down bum, he could see only careless brutality. He felt that the escape of the Relic without broken bones was due more to the pride of Stormy Steve in performing difficult feats without a failure, than to aught of humanity in the fellow's composition. A broken bone would blur his own light.

Then, if the truth must be told, the destruction of the faro-table on which, but an instant before, his elbow had been resting, took Milo Tyrwhite entirely by surprise, and it was the consciousness that he had betrayed more haste than grace in saving himself from injury that helped to send his fist so surely to the mark.

The blow delivered, he stood ready to meet the consequence boldly, but without anything like bluster or bravado. But the cool, careless, almost contemptuous manner in which Stormy Steve treated him, quickly sent his hot blood to the boiling pitch, and almost before he realized the fact, he lost control of his temper and fell into the very fault which he so unmercifully condemned in others.

The short, mocking laugh that broke from the lips of the athlete showed Milo this, and his pale face flushed hotly with an unusual sensation of shame. A peculiar chill crept over him as he met those great, glowing eyes, and it seemed as

though his heart was swelling until it must suffocate him, unless relief came speedily.

"On guard, you say? Against what?" asked Stormy Steve, his drooping mustaches curling as with a smile of scornful contempt to match that in his voice.

Then he added with what seemed pity in his tones:

"Go home, boy, and try to forget that you ever essayed the part of a man. Go home, and wait until your beard be grown. Time enough then to crow in the hearing of tested game-cocks."

"If a 'stag,'" retorted Tyrwhite, falling into the same metaphorical line taken by Stormy Steve, "I've been deemed fit to heel and pit before now. You've got the marks of my gaffs on your head now. Once more—on guard, or I'll leave a double photograph of my knuckles on your handsome face!"

"If you can, say," laughed Stormy Steve.

Even then, boiling hot though his blood was, Milo Tyrwhite hesitated to accept the defiance, for Stormy Steve still stood with folded arms, facing him without the slightest pretense at guarding his blood-marked face. He was smiling. There was a mocking devil dancing in his big blue eyes. He seemed to hold his adversary too cheaply to even think of setting a price.

Milo flashed a glance toward the interested spectators who were gradually moving nearer the two men, then cried:

"Gentlemen, I call you to witness that I have given this burly brute fair warning, not only once, but twice over. Now—down goes your house, bully!"

Almost savagely the words passed his compressed lips, and throwing all his skill and power into the effort, Milo Tyrwhite shot out his clinched right fist straight for those laughing, mocking eyes.

A quick *spat*, sharper and clearer than the first, followed the impact of flesh against flesh, but—how did it happen?

Milo Tyrwhite found his fist helpless in the palm of the athlete, caught before it could touch the face of Stormy Steve, though the stroke had been swift as thought itself!

One instant thus. He had barely time to realize the unaccountable fact, than a resounding roar broke from those bearded lips, and out rung the wild slogan:

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!"

With motions so swift that the human eye was baffled in trying to follow them, the Human Cyclone twisted Milo Tyrwhite from his footing, transferring his grip from wrist to ankles, rising erect and swinging the young man swiftly around his head in a dizzy circle! Then he shifted from both hands to single one, still keeping up that terrible whirling through the air, seemingly without even then calling his marvelous powers into full play!

It was a strange, blood-curdling sight, and even Billy Ullman turned a shade paler and looked uneasy as he watched the wonderful act of the mad athlete. Even he feared that Stormy Steve had lost all control of himself. Feared that in the end the luckless young man would be hurled with deadly force in a tangent to that fearful circle, to meet sure death against one of the walls!

There was no time for interference, had any man present been daring enough to take such a step, before Stormy Steve, with another wild roar, shot up his left hand and arrested the dizzy whirl of his victim. Then, with a mighty heave and toss, he shot the body up to the very ceiling, catching it as it shot downward, lowering Tyrwhite to the floor without a perceptible shock.

He laughed lightly as his strong arm encircled and supported the breathless, dizzy man. He held him as tenderly to his heart as a lover clasps his divinity while on the floor, and humming a slow waltz, the mad athlete danced lightly round and around until he reached the bar with his almost fainting "partner!"

"Sling out the best you've got, Billy boy, and we'll wash the ugly words out of our throats—eh, my gallant lad?"

But for the strong arm of Stormy Steve, Milo Tyrwhite would have dropped to the sanded floor, even then. That mad whirl in mid-air had turned his brains upside down, and his head seemed transformed into a nest of angrily-buzzing hornets. He glared blindly around him as he strove to recognize his whereabouts, and then, game to the last, he clinched his fist and struck feebly in the direction the cheery voice appeared to come!

He was wide of the mark, and a laugh broke from those who saw his action; but it was quickly hushed as Stormy Steve turned upon them, his brows corrugated, his blue eyes flashing fire, and his voice fiercely menacing:

"Drop that, gentlemen, unless you are hungry for sport! You laugh at him because he's a trifle upset, but even so, he's worth more than the whole of you combined! You cleared the track when you saw the cyclone coming. He was the only man in the house who stood his ground and dared to crow for himself. He gave me a bloody face, and that's more than any half-dozen picked from this crowd can duplicate! He proved his manhood, and from this out he's

my friend. Who insults him, insults me—and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box, by a large majority!"

Bold words for a single man, and he armed only with the weapons born with him, to fling in the teeth of over a score hardy, reckless men, more than one of whom could point with pride to his "private graveyard." But that man was Stormy Steve, and the hardest desperado within hearing of his voice dared not answer his threats with steel or lead.

Milo Tyrwhite was gradually recovering from the effects of that singular trip through the air, and as he leaned against the counter he comprehended how Stormy Steve was defending him. Those words did more to banish his anger than the worst thrashing could have wrought, and it was with almost a sense of shame that the young man suffered his hand to be grasped in the warm palm of the mad athlete.

"To you, my dear fellow," cordially and earnestly uttered Stormy Steve, "I owe an apology, and here it is. I ask your pardon for the brutal manner in which I have treated you. In my sober senses I would never have stooped so low. Not that I am drunk. Liquor can't phaze me when one of my cyclone fits takes possession of me. I'm a crazy demon then, and the Worst Pill in the Box!"

"I fear you can't understand just what that means. Even I can't quite make it out. I only know that when the fit strikes me, I have to go on a wild jamboree or burst my boiler! I don't think death itself could stop me until the extra steam fairly worked off—and sometimes I have to laugh as I picture the consternation of King Satan and his imps when Stormy Steve kicks up a ruction down below!"

He laughed loud and heartily. He turned, and, knocking off the neck of a bottle with the deft stroke of a thumb, filled a couple of glasses, pushing one toward Milo, as he added:

"If you can overlook my folly, join me in a glass. After all, I bear more marks of the skirmish than you do!"

He laughingly touched the cut between his eyes.

Milo Tyrwhite flushed a trifle, for he felt that Stormy Steve was showing up far better than he could hope to do, despite his wild gasconade recently. He was something more than an ordinary bully, after all; and realizing this, the young man extended one hand to meet that warm grasp, taking the glass in his other. But before he could utter a word, a ragged, shaggy apparition rose from behind the counter, and as horse-hair came in trembling contact with catgut, a doleful wail startled them all into a fit of laughter.

Of course it was the Relic, redolent of whisky, his red nose more blooming than ever, a fishy, lack-luster light in his gray eyes. He flung back his head as the horrible wail died away, and huskily improvised:

"Now *thar*'s Stormy Steve, he's a mighty bad man—A terror you all kin perceive;

He kerries a thunder merchine in each han',

An' a cyclone up each sleeve!

He's a high-up ole pill, warranted to cure or to kill,

But I don't want any in mine;

You kin bet your ole socks, he's the wu'st in the box,

This night o' '79!"

The Relic dodged below the counter as his fiddle gave another outlandish screech, but as Stormy Steve laughed heartily, his flaming nose cautiously stole above the barrier and a whisky-scented whisper floated across the bar:

"I'll do it ag'in fer a quarter, boss!"

"Give him a grab at the treasury, Billy boy," nodded the mad athlete. "I owe him a trifle for the gentle exercise he gave me, a bit ago."

"Gi' me *two* grabs, boss, an' you kin use me that-a-way ontel my teeth drop out an' my back ha'r comes down!" eagerly cried the Relic; but Stormy Steve had forgotten his existence.

He faced Milo Tyrwhite, still grasping his hand closely, and his voice was hearty as he spoke:

"Some day I hope to meet you as Stephen Hasbrook, and show you that I am not all brute and devil. Just now, I'm only Stormy Steve, and if my words take something of my actions, don't weigh them too nicely."

"I fear I am the one who should apologize. There was really no excuse for my striking you," hesitated Milo.

"You thought there was, and you did it like a little man, too! You came nearer staggering me than ever bare fist did before. And now—it is Stormy Steve that speaks—let me say that while I admire your pluck, I don't go a cent on the sort of judgment you displayed."

He bowed, touched glasses, tossed off the liquor, then whirled the heavy glass up to the ceiling. As it came flashing down, he met it with his clinched fist so forcibly that the fragments of glass fell around in a glittering shower. He held up his hand, white, unscarred, not even discolored by the blow, so perfect was his condition. Then—

"The steam is gathering too much force, and I'm going to blow off in a minute! First, let me say: I hope to see more of you. If I am plain Stephen Hasbrook when that meeting takes place, and you should fancy my apology not sufficiently ample, I'll be most happy to give

you any sort of satisfaction you may demand."

Milo Tyrwhite smiled faintly, flushing a trifle as he made reply:

"If you wish it, I'll certainly ask—or offer—it."

"I?" and Stormy Steve laughed heartily. "Bless your dear soul, lad, I never can remember what happens while I am on one of my jamborees! If I do harm or offend, I expect to hear of it when plain Stephen Hasbrook, and then I make all the amends possible. Even had you knocked me down with that pretty blow, I'd have naught but the mark in the morning to tell me that trouble occurred of some sort."

Milo Tyrwhite laughed, pleasantly.

"If it rests with me, be sure I'll never freshen your memory; I'm not so proud of the part I have played in it!"

"Takes water like a duck, don't he?" broke out a coarse voice from the crowd.

But it found no echo, for Stormy Steve whirled in that direction, and to screen themselves, all fell apart from the man who had flung the taunt at the stranger.

"You, cur!" grated Stormy Steve, leaping forward and gripping the fellow by the shoulders, forcing him to his knees. "Swallow your vile words, and beg the gentleman's pardon for having uttered them, or I'll—"

A hand was placed on his quivering arm, and turning, he saw Milo Tyrwhite at his side, his face pale but firm.

Not a word was spoken, but Stormy Steve read the other's meaning aright, and his terrible grip relaxed. With a gasping howl of pain, the poor devil rose and reeled toward the door, his arms dangling helplessly by his side, feeling as though the bones in them had been crushed to powder.

"Thank you, Mr. Hasbrook," said Milo, in a low tone; but Stormy Steve had apparently forgotten all about him, and paid no attention to his words as he turned toward the bar.

"Billy, is there anything left in the treasury?"

"Plenty, old fellow," was the prompt reply.

"Good enough! Now gentlemen, I'm just growing moldy for want of a little mild exercise. Of course I know you're all above the necessity of hiring out at wage, but Billy yonder has a golden eagle for each and every man who takes a hand in the game, win or lose. An eagle and all doctor bills paid for those who help exercise the Human Cyclone! A double eagle for each and every man who helps to throw and tie Stormy Steve, be he one or be they a score! Catch-as-catch-can! And here I am in the arena—Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Leaping high from the floor he whirled over in the air, striking a graceful attitude in the open space, the picture of manly strength and activity.

"Off with your tools, first, gents!" cried Billy Ullman, as he read aright the swift glances which passed between the different members of the crowd. "And I'll riddle the man who attempts to play foul! You know who's talking, I reckon!"

"And I'll treat you like new-born babes, gentlemen," the mad athlete laughed, invitingly. "You couldn't earn a double eagle any quicker, or with less wear and tear of mind or body. Only to down and tie one little runt of a man—just think!"

It was a tempting offer, considering how many there were to accept it, and there was slight delay in removing weapon-belts and placing them in charge of Billy Ullman. Surely the laughing athlete was mad! Surely he cared little for money, to fling away gold by the handful after that fashion!

And then a ring of eager men surrounded the athlete, moving warily back and forth as he revolved, receding from his front and seeking to close in at his back. But—

Stormy Steve roared out his defiant slogan, and leaped into the thickest portion of his "exercisers."

Instantly he was covered over with strong men, the mass reeling to and fro, surging hither and yon, while a man was reeling back dizzily, or shooting through the air like a human frog, as Stormy Steve brought his truly marvelous powers into full play, seemingly just in his glory!

It was a wild, thrilling scene, but one that baffles description. Twice the mass flattened to the floor, and it seemed as though Stormy Steve would be smothered beneath his antagonists; but as often he writhed and worked out of the coil, sending up his peculiar slogan again and again, laughing, jolly, and wholeheartedly entering into the business of the moment.

But then, just as he cleared himself from the writhing mass for the third time, still unconquered, a shrill, piercing scream came from outside—the voice of a woman, crying for help! the voice of one in dire extremity!

"Help! save me! for the love of Heaven!"

"A woman!" thundered Stormy Steve, who was now near the rear of the room; and leaping into the air, he hurled himself feet foremost at the closed window, disappearing amid a crash of shattered glass and splintering wood!

"Cedora—Miss Verner!" hoarsely cried Milo Tyrwhite, and he leaped through the swinging doors with a wild cry.

CHAPTER V.

PAST PHANTOMS AND PRESENT REALITIES.

THEY were dark and troubled thoughts that kept Cedora Verner company after the hurried departure of her father.

Though her head was bowed upon the little table where Jason Verner had spread that strangely worded letter from one whom they had both considered long dead, her face hidden in her white hands, the tears flowing freely through her fingers, the phantoms of the past stood out before her vision with startling distinctness.

Many and varied were the mind-pictures; some bright and lovely, others hard-lined and disagreeable; some entirely foreign to the story we have set out to tell, but others so closely connected therewith that at least a passing mention must be made of them. Not as she saw them, but placed in regular order and condensed as much as possible.

The Tyrwhite name was one of the oldest in Boston, and time was when it enjoyed its full share of public honors, as a search of the records will show. The family was numerous, and appeared to be the especial favorites of fortune, for all of their ventures succeeded, and whatever they touched seemed to turn to gold.

But when the tide turned against them, its course was to the full as marked. One by one the Tyrwhites went down, leaving only a memory to mark the disaster. And when Jason Verner fell in love with Mabel Tyrwhite, but that single branch of the once numerous family remained in existence.

It was a small one, consisting of Mabel, her brother Jason, his wife and one child, called Albus.

James Tyrwhite frowned on the suit of Jason, for there was little love lost between the two men, thanks to their business interests being in the same line, where they had more than once been brought into an antagonism that damaged the temper and pocket of both. He was a stern, silent man, who said but little even when deepest moved; hard and pitiless when he knew himself to be in the right; a severely honest man, who would rather sever his right hand at the wrist than suffer it to wittingly defraud even a business rival. And his dislike for Jason Verner was rooted in a stubborn belief that on at least one occasion the latter had stooped to cunning and underhand methods of gaining his ends.

Mabel saw his dark looks, and read them aright, but she was under the spell that comes to us all early or late, and in the end she became the wife of Jason Verner.

There was no open rupture, for Tyrwhite loved his sister; but there was little cordiality in the regular visits which kept up the connection between the two families. James felt that Jason only wanted the right opportunity to prove himself an arrant rogue; Jason looked on James as a cunning hypocrite beneath a puritanical mask.

So the days passed on. Children came to both houses, and tarrying briefly, passed on to the silent churchyard. As when they first met, Albus still remained the only child that bore the name of Tyrwhite.

He grew rapidly, strong and full of animal life, constantly on the go, hardly still while sleeping, bold and reckless, quick-tongued and keen of wit, hating anything like a rogue or double-dealer with all the fervor of his headlong nature.

With all his faults Albus fairly idolized his cold, stern father, and when, by chance he overheard the merchant bitterly denouncing Jason Verner to his wife, he needed no more to make him hate the man as only such a lad can hate and loathe.

He was by no means backward in showing this sentiment, and from that day on, he and Jason Verner were at swords' points; nor did the man always come off the victor in their collisions.

Thus the breach grew wider between the two families.

Milo Tyrwhite was born, and James Tyrwhite showed an unusual degree of interest in and love for the laughing little stranger. It was a side of his cold, hard nature which he had never turned toward Albus, at least since the boy could note and reason, and his great love for his father caused him to envy and almost hate the little one, at first.

He was growing to be a stout lad, with figure and strength far beyond his years, when this occurred. In his secret unhappiness, he grew wilder than ever, and more than once his reckless, thoughtless frolics brought him into collision with the officers of the law. Nothing more serious than disturbing the peace, but the publicity thus given his name caused James Tyrwhite to bitterly reproach his son, and to show him even more than customary coldness.

Jason Verner enjoyed it, however, and lost no opportunity of cutting the lad whom he hated even more than he did his parent; but

one day he crossed over to the wrong side of the line, and suffered accordingly.

Albus retorted sharply; without thinking he repeated the words his father had used, years before. They may have been wholly unjust, but they stung the merchant to the quick, and with a fierce oath, he grasped a whip from the socket close to his hand, leaped from the carriage and attempted to chastise the audacious youngster.

The one blow was all. The whip was wrenched from his hand, and like a tiger the lad leaped upon him, both hands tearing at his throat, his handsome face fairly hideous with rage.

After a brief struggle, they fell to the curb together, and, half-stunned by the shock, Jason Verner lay helpless at the mercy of the lad whom he had taunted to madness. And then, before the astounded crowd, for it was in the middle of the day and on one of the prominent streets of Boston, Albus Tyrwhite caught up the carriage whip and used it on his prostrate foe, with all the power of his nervous arm, only ceasing when a blue-coated guardian of the peace caught his hand.

That was a bitter black day for Jason Verner. He was little loved by his acquaintances in business, and while none of them mourned over his mishap, there were some who took a malicious delight in seeing that a strongly colored report of the affair found publicity in the papers.

Verner did not appear to bear witness against Albus, and the lad was discharged from custody; but he did lay complaint before James Tyrwhite, saying little of the provocation, but dwelling long and forcibly on the outrageous insult he had suffered. He demanded that Albus render him an apology as public as the insult had been, and James Tyrwhite, already irritated against his wild son, promised that amends should be made without delay.

He said as much to Albus when the lad came soberly home. He cut short the lad's speech of justification. He had done wrong. When that wrong was made right, he would be heard. But until he publicly apologized to Jason Verner, and performed whatever penance that gentleman might see fit to impose on him by way of further punishment, he, his father, regarded him as an alien and no son of his.

Without a word the proud-spirited lad turned and crept away from the presence of the father whose face he was never to see again in this world. He felt that he was being punished unjustly, but he did not blame his father. His love was far too strong for that. He laid all at the door of Jason Verner, and with boyish vengeance he swore to one day balance the bitter black score against him.

That night Albus Tyrwhite disappeared, and years passed before word came from him. His father had given him up as dead, and though he said little, he had scored a broad black mark against Jason Verner in his heart, for there were those among the immediate witnesses of the affray who took pains to clear up all misapprehension on his part.

It was but a brief note that bore the large package company; a note without either date or locality to mark from what quarter of the globe it had started; but it bore the name of the long-missing son, and in every free, breezy word might be traced the character of Albus Tyrwhite, whose full name was appended.

There was a brief message for each one of the family; on the surface careless, but underneath lay sincere love and affection. And there were rare, curious, costly presents for each as well, "that they might not entirely forget the black sheep of the flock."

Gentle aunt Mary was remembered by both message and memento; so was Jason Verner—after a characteristic fashion.

"May old Two-and-six have the toothache until I can find time to make that apology! And to keep him from forgetting the debt in his growing age and waning faculties, I beg him to accept this miniature edition of the very useful article which I had the exquisite pleasure of giving him at our last meeting!"

And the name of Jason Verner was pasted to an elegant horsewhip!

Without a smile or word of comment, James Tyrwhite had one of his clerks copy the message, do up the present, and deliver it to Jason Verner, with his compliments. That was the last feather, and from thence to the end the breach between the rival merchants was complete.

Dim and shadowy these memories came back to Cedora Verner that evening, as her head bowed over the table in the parlor of the Sanctuary. Young as she had been when it happened, she could just remember the terrible rage which convulsed her father for days and days afterward. And she remembered how her pale, suffering, yet patient and loving mother, took her on her lap, and after vainly striving to evade her curiosity, told her the long and troubled story. She never forgot. She could see it all now, though the greater portion had taken place before she came into the world.

Other phantoms of the past came gliding silently along and claimed her attention; phantoms brighter, dearer, but alas! only phantoms! She remembered the days long gone by when she used to covertly watch and admire the hand-

some, graceful lad whom her nurse pointed out as Milo Tyrwhite, her cousin. At first she would turn pale and tremble whenever those brilliant black eyes turned toward her baby face, for she was taught by Jason Verner to regard a Tyrwhite as a veritable ogre of evil; but then—it was years after, and Milo Tyrwhite was a man grown, and she was entering her teens—his voice, his manners, his sunny smile; there was little of the ogre in any of them.

It was the old, old story the phantoms went on to tell. A gallant lover, and a charming sweetheart; stolen interviews in the pleasant gloaming; whispered pleadings and subdued assent; the sweetly-wild delight of recognizing her love, and the fact that it was returned by—surely not an ogre!

Milo Tyrwhite was for at once calling on Jason Verner and asking his consent and blessing, but Cedora coaxed him to put off the evil day until she could pave the way, or, at least, win over her gentle, sad-faced mother to their side.

This was not so very difficult, for aunt Mary was still a Tyrwhite at heart, and she already loved the bright-eyed young man; but when Jason Verner was approached, then there was a storm indeed.

Perhaps its very fury made its duration the briefer. It may be that he remembered that James Tyrwhite was very rich, and rapidly aging; that Milo was his only heir—for nothing had been heard of Albus since that long-distant day of the package of gifts. It is barely possible that all this may have had its effect, for Jason Verner worshiped gold the more ardently the grayer his hair grew. At any rate, he did cool down and consent to listen to the plea of the lovers, backed as they were by his wife, firmer, more dignified, more resolute and self-asserting than he had ever known her.

"Bring me a letter from James Tyrwhite," he said, coldly. "If he begs that my daughter may honor you with her hand in marriage, I will take the matter into consideration. Good-day."

Stiff and formal, as in everything else; but still it was better than his first fierce rejection, and hopefully Milo set off to obtain the needed letter. He never told what it cost him to succeed, nor how long and passionately he pled before James Tyrwhite could bring his pride to yield so far. Had not the outwardly cold, hard man fairly idolized his youngest son, that letter would never have been written.

Then, for a few short months all was bright and blissful, and the maiden shed tears more bitter than ever as she recalled those too-brief days. And what wonder if, deep down in her sore heart, she felt like muttering a curse against the gold that, she could not help believing, lay at the bottom of all.

A rapid series of reverses overtook James Tyrwhite, and the day that published his ruin to the world, saw him placed to rest beside his wife and his sleeping babes.

It was ruin, comparatively speaking, though when his business came to be settled up, all debts were canceled and a few thousands remained for Milo Tyrwhite.

From that day Jason Verner seemed looking for flaws and faults in the man whom he had accepted as a future son. Not openly and aboveboard. If cold, he was still polite after his fashion, whenever he met Milo; but both lovers felt that he would be only too glad could he find a plausible pretext for breaking off the match.

Broken off it was, in the end, and partly through the wild jealousy and pride of the maiden who was the greatest sufferer in the end. Yet, even now, she could not blame herself for sending back his ring, his letters and gifts. If all was true as it seemed—if he was really the fickle, careless, evil man appearances made him out—if no treachery had been employed!

The proof was so plain, so overwhelming—how could she refuse to believe? The sin was so brutal, so base, so damning!

A woman whom she had casually met and become slightly acquainted with in the past, but of whom she had long lost sight of, came to her one day as she sat in the company of her father and mother, and told a piteous tale of wrong and sin. She carried a little black-eyed babe in her arms, which she swore on her bended knees was his—was the child of Milo Tyrwhite and herself!

She showed them a letter which was—or seemed to be—in his handwriting, brutally casting her off, saying that their pretended marriage was but an empty farce. He was on the point of marrying a lady, and he swore that if she ever troubled him again after that fashion, she would rue it to her dying day. He sent her money to take her to the end of the world, if she could summon sense enough to last her so far. She might make the most of it, for it was the last price he would pay for the past.

There was no name signed to the letter, but it was line for line, letter for letter, a *fac-simile* of his peculiar hand.

Even aunt Mary was convinced, tenderly as she had loved the man; then why should the proud-spirited girl doubt? She did not—then.

Milo Tyrwhite called, but was refused admit-

tance. He even tried to force an entrance, but the servants, acting on the stern orders of their master, repulsed him. And then, one dark night, the family fled far away from town, leaving no clew to guide the half-distracted lover.

From that day to this—more than a year—speech had not passed between the once lovers. They had rarely met, and then only by chance. Milo Tyrwhite had apparently accepted the situation, but Cedora often doubted whether he knew what had caused her to so sharply discard him. For now that the first sharp pangs had healed over, she doubted the truth of those horrible charges. He was too open-hearted, too noble, too wholly a gentleman in thought, word and action, to stoop so frightfully low.

Then came that strange letter from the long-absent cousin whom she had never met in the flesh. Then the hasty journey almost across the continent to the little mining town of Small Hopes. A journey that was in part shared by Milo Tyrwhite, who rode on the driver's seat while they occupied the interior, for the last few stages. He made no attempt to renew the past. He barely touched his hat to them when they were obliged to meet face to face when beginning or pausing in the weary ride. His face was cold and hard—oh! so unlike the beaming face she used to know in those dear, dead days!

She felt hurt by this proud reserve, even though at first she would have shrunk with pain from any more cordial recognition. And as she brooded over it, her temporarily smothered love began to rekindle and to struggle for renewed life.

"Heaven forgive me if I do him wrong!" she murmured, her pale, tear stained face suddenly lifting from the table, her blue eyes filling with a brighter light. "If father was at the bottom of that vile conspiracy, I could almost—"

Strongly as she felt, she could not then pronounce the words that trembled on the tip of her tongue. He was still her father. She loved him, as in duty bound. She wanted to honor him as a child should, but despite herself, that bitter black suspicion would return and haunt her until it seemed as though her poor brain must give way beneath its weight of doubt and wretchedness.

"If he was not so cold—if he would only speak to me—only ask once more why I cast him off—it would not be so hard to bear! I could tell by his eyes what truth there was in that horrible story! But he will not—he scorns me—and can I blame him?"

She rose to her feet and paced rapidly to and fro, her fingers interlocked before her, her face the battle-ground of bitterly conflicting emotions.

"If he was guilty, he would know that his sin had found him out—for nothing less serious could have led to my acting as I have. Knowing this, would he face me so coldly, so proudly? Would he not fear to meet my reproachful gaze? He would! he would cringe and shrink away, for none but a coward at heart could commit such a revolting crime!"

"Instead, one would say that he had suffered wrong and been treated unjustly! And—I feel that he has! If I thought—if I knew that, I would never know rest until I met him face to face and on my knees begged his pardon for doubting his truth and honor even for a moment! I would—"

She paused both in speech and motion. She stood like one struggling against some unseen power, then, with a low, gasping cry, she hurried from the room, up-stairs to her chamber.

A few moments later she returned, her face closely muffled in a dark shawl, passing hurriedly out of the hotel by the little door at one side of the bar-room. She acted like one who feared observation, and a long breath broke from her lungs as she gained the rough, unpaved street without being spoken to or particularly noticed, if noticed at all.

When fairly clear of the hotel, her hasty steps slowed, and she glanced irresolutely about her as though in doubt just what course to follow.

She had acted on impulse, longing to see and speak to Milo Tyrwhite—to have him confirm or forever brush aside the heavy sin which had been placed at his door; but where was she to look for him? how find him, in that strange place?

She was hardly accountable for her actions, poor child! Those brooding thoughts had almost unsettled her brain, and there is no telling whither they might have led her, had not a dark figure leaped forward and deftly twisted her own shawl about her head and face, stifling the shriek of terror that rose to her lips at the savage assault!

The villain caught her up in his strong arms, and darted back into the deeper shadow, at the same time uttering a short whistle that seemed to be a signal, for it found an immediate echo from no great distance.

"Lively, Bill, with the critters! I've got the gal, an' she's kickin' wuss than a scratch-cat! We want to git out o' this in a holy hurry, ef we don't want to ketch—"

The sentence remained incomplete, for he needed all his energies to retain his grasp on his captive, so desperate were her struggles to free

herself. She strove to shriek aloud in hopes of alarming the honest portion of the town, but the many folds of the shawl prevented more than a husky, strained gasping.

A man hurried up to the bold kidnapper, leading a pair of saddled horses.

"Ketch holt o' her hoofs, ef you kin," growled the first rascal. "She's wuss then a yearlin' heifer fer kickin', an' I've got the hull alferbet writ onto my shins a'ready! Durn a woman, anyhow, I say!"

"Not when they're worth as much as this one, Hop," laughed the other wretch, grasping Cedora and relieving his panting mate. "Jump aboard, and I'll hand her up to you. Lively, now!"

He was as good as his word, and a minute later Hop Tanker was riding at a trot toward the edge of Small Hopes, Bill Jones keeping close in his rear, as a guard.

They saw several men moving up or down the street, but no one appeared to have seen or heard anything of the capture, and they felt that their prize was as good as secured, when Cedora managed to free her lips sufficiently to shriek:

"Help! save me! for the love of Heaven!"

With a snarling curse, Hop Tanker drew back his huge fist and dashed it full against her head with all his brutal power!

CHAPTER VI.

FOR LOVE AND BEAUTY.

HURLING sash and all before him, Stormy Steve shot through the rear window of Billy's Bower, alighting safely on his feet with the commingled skill and good fortune which had thus far attended his wild exploits that night. Rebounding like a man of rubber and steel springs, he dashed to the corner of the building and found himself in bright moonlight.

He beheld two horsemen just turning from the main street around the saloon, and saw that the one in the lead held some sort of bundle before him, supported mainly by his left arm, as he looked backward toward the front entrance of the saloon.

Already there was a wild uproar in that direction, telling the two rascals that the appealing cry of their captive had not fallen on heedless ears.

"Turn the corner, Hop, and spur for the hills!" cried Bill Jones, biting off a savage oath as he drew a revolver.

Hop Tanker obeyed, only to find a lion in the path!

Fearing lest the ruffian should murder his captive when he saw her rescue was inevitable, Stormy Steve did not leap direct at the head of the frightened horse as instinct bade him, but stooping, snatched up a rough, irregular, heavy stone.

A clear, menacing roar escaped his lips, and for the first time Hop Tanker caught sight of the spangled figure that barred his way. A curse of mingled fear and surprise escaped his bearded lips, and he involuntarily wrenched up his horse.

The worse for him!

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box—and down goes your house, Johnny!"

Wilder, fiercer than ever rung out the peculiar slogan, and through the air shot that mass of stone, hurled by the strongest arm in all Silver-land! And without even a gasp or a groan, the daring kidnapper, smitten fairly in the face, was swept from the saddle and hurled a dozen feet away by that terrible missile!

For a single instant the muffled figure of the senseless maiden hung balanced across the saddle of the terrified horse, then, as the animal started sharply back and aside, only the lightning activity and strong arms of Stormy Steve saved her from an ugly fall on the rough ground.

Bill Jones was guarding against danger from the rear, and he never so much as suspected danger in front, until that wild roar rent the air. He saw the mad athlete hurl the stone—he saw his fellow in evil swept from the saddle, slain or put out of the fight as surely as though the concentrated might of a cyclone had centered upon him. He knew that their prize was lost for the time, if not forever, unless—

His frightened horse stopped of its own accord, awed by that lion-like outburst. He glanced behind him and he saw all hope of escape was cut off in that direction. Billy's Bower was vomiting forth its excited contents, and one active figure was even then almost beside his animal. Another breath, and powder would flash and ragged lead hum viciously.

Before him—but a single man, and he with a senseless woman on his arm!

All this in an instant of time, and almost before the body of Hop Tanker lost the impetus lent it by that terrible missile, his comrade was dashing straight upon Stormy Steve, his revolver spitting fire and lead at each leap of his good horse. Escape—revenge—the prize, after all!

Barely long enough to break the force of her fall did the mad athlete hold Cedora Verner in his powerful arms. Then as the vicious lead began to hiss about him, he leaped nimbly to one side, stooping and dropping his burden as gently as he could under the pressure, then—

"I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Unarmed, save with the weapons he brought into the world with him, Stormy Steve leaped back and toward the desperate rider, pealing forth his wild slogan, laughing fiercely as a pistol-ball stung across his cheek like the touch of a red-hot iron.

For almost the first time in his life Bill Jones fully realized the meaning of the word fear. This was surely something more than a mere mortal! No man, unless a lunatic, would dare such certain death, and seem to actually enjoy it!

He had barely time to fire one more shot, and that without anything like a deliberate aim, for the mad athlete was already crouching for the leap that would carry him almost near enough to grapple. He could not tell whether that shot took effect or not, and with a savage oath, he lifted his horse by the head, driving his cruel spurs rowel deep into its ribs, urging it to beat down that glittering figure with its iron-shod hoofs!

And then the men of Small Hopes who had reached the corner of Billy's Bower were enabled by the clear moonlight to witness a singular spectacle, brief but thrilling enough while it lasted to check their breathing and still the mad throbbings of their hearts!

Stormy Steve made no effort to elude that uplifted and threatening avalanche of flesh and bone. Instead, he pealed forth his wild slogan and sprung forward, grasping the two iron-bot-tomed feet that threatened to crush him to death!

His powerful arms were crossed as he fastened his fingers upon the legs. His magnificent form was stooped, half-way beneath the rearing animal, whose body thus served to shield him from the revolver of the wildly-cursing kidnapper who bent far over in the saddle, his cruel spurs tearing through hide and flesh to the very bone.

Then—the mad athlete uncrossed his arms, twisting the forelegs of the snorting brute, and throwing his weight, his whole strength into the massive shoulders that straightened up—pushed to one side—and over went both horse and rider, with a terrible crash upon the rough ground!

One moment of breathless, wondering silence, for they could hardly believe the evidence of their own senses, and oh! what a cheer rose from the relieved lungs of the sports who saw a single man grapple with and cleanly throw a mounted horse!

And when the mad athlete lightly leaped upon the struggling horse, one foot resting on its neck, the other on its painfully-heaving side, bowing gracefully as he deftly maintained his balance, paying no attention to the worsted desperado who was pinned to the ground by one leg—when he flung up one white hand and shouted in ringing tones:

"I'm a Human Cyclone, and the king of all bosses!"

It did not sound at all like an extravagant boast. From that hour Stormy Steve could commit no sin, in the estimation of the men of Small Hopes!

There was but one man who saw nothing of Stormy Steve and his wondrous exploits, after the senseless maiden was set free from the savage grasp of Hop Tanker. That was Milo Tyrwhite, whose true ear had recognized the voice of the maiden whom he loved—loved all the more ardently for the cloud which had fallen between them like a funereal pall—recognized it through closed doors and despite its strained and terror-stricken accents.

He was close beside Bill Jones when that rascal opened fire on Stormy Steve, but he paid no attention to either. He saw his precious one dropped to the ground, and with a choking cry, for he feared she was dead, he darted to her side, snatched her up in his trembling arms, backing away from the scene of Stormy Steve's greatest triumph, thinking only of saving her from further injury if life still lingered in her veins.

He lifted the muffling shawl from her face with hands that trembled so violently as to almost deny their duty, and a low groan of bitterest agony broke from his lips as he saw how still and ghastly was that face—so like that of a corpse, despite the great bruise—or was it merely blood?

He saw nothing, heard nothing else. He stood in the full light of the clear, round moon, and with its aid searched for some signs of life. He heard not the enthusiastic cheering of the Small Hopes sports. He heard nothing of the words pealed forth by Stormy Steve as he acknowledged this tribute to his wonderful prowess. Nor did he know that another pair of eyes were wildly fixed upon the face of the silent maiden—knew nothing of this until, with a hoarse, gasping cry, a man leaped upon him and strove to wrest the motionless form away.

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!" rung out the tones of the mad athlete once more. "I'm a cyclone from Twisterville, and only an ass would match a horse to wrestle with the master who practices with elephants and the cholera-morbus! Send on your biggest—"

With a savage roar he whirled about as Milo Tyrwhite resisted the efforts of the man who had so suddenly assailed him, crying out:

"Off, you devils! She's mine—dead, if lost while living!"

"My child—my child!" hoarsely cried the other, but before he could say more, or before the half-crazed lover could recognize him for what he was, Jason Verner was grasped by a pair of hands that seemingly never tired and knew no limit.

Stormy Steve caught him by thigh and shoulder, twisting him from his feet; lifting him at arm's length above his head, threatening to dash him down to meet sure death on the rocky ground.

"The more the merrier!" laughed the mad athlete, seeming to enjoy the wild cries and pleadings of his terrified victim, as a cat takes delight in tormenting a mouse. "Come singly or in legions, I care not! I'm the Worst Pill in the Box, and every pellet to-night is running over with rankest poison! Say your prayers, if you know any, yelping cur! Time is short, and there may be others of your breed waiting for—"

"Hold! he is her father!" cried Milo Tyrwhite, recognizing Jason Verner at last.

The words had scarcely left his lips before Stormy Steve lowered his captive to the ground, right end up, his fine frenzy vanishing like magic, to give place to a genial, even solicitous air of polite inquiry.

"My dear sir, I heartily beg your pardon for the outrageous mistake, but, really, I took you for one of the piratical crew of woman-abusers, and was about to treat you accordingly. I humbly trust you are little the worse for my error?"

There are apologies and apologies. The most critical could have found no fault with the words Stormy Steve uttered, and his voice was politeness itself; but shaken as he was, Jason Verner felt that the mad athlete was laughing at him and his discomfiture—that there was far more of insult than of real regret in that nicely-worded speech.

Sorely shaken, sick at the stomach as though he had been tossed on a stormy sea for a week, he staggered back and was saved from sinking to the ground only by coming in contact with the side of the building. But his tongue was not paralyzed, and he hoarsely gasped:

"You villain—you big scoundrel! I'll have the law of you. I'll make you sweat blood for this vile outrage if it takes my last dollar! You—"

His rage choked him. Perhaps it was helped by a heavy hand that just then closed upon his shoulder. And a stern, rebuking voice uttered in his ear:

"Drop that sort of lingo, you old duffer! If the lady is any kin to you, you'd ought to go down on your marrow-bones to Stormy Steve and thank him for saving her from those devils, instead of abusing him like a horse-thief!"

Billy Ullman looked anything but genial then, as he read Jason Verner this lecture on gratitude. His face was grim and hard-set. His blue eyes were full of scorn and contempt, pretty well spiced with indignation.

The old man shrunk away from him as far as the wall of the building would permit, trembling, fear-smitten, his gray eyes glowing like those of a terrified rat. It was all so new and terrible to him, this wild and lawless life!

Stormy Steve laughed lightly and uttered:

"Don't set on him too heavy, Charming Billy. The poor old fellow is still turned upside down, and is hardly accountable for what he says or does. Not that I look for anything in the shape of thanks or gratitude from the likes o' him!"

Was there a trace of bitterness in those last words? Or was it merely careless contempt?

Jason Verner was by far too thoroughly "turned upside down" to ask himself that question, and none other within earshot thought of doing so. Just then, all that Stormy Steve did or said was perfect and flawless. A man who could—HURRAH!

Billy Ullman started the ball. He grasped the hands of his eccentric friend and patron, wringing them as though he felt himself a patent attachment to a washing machine. He called the mad athlete pet names, he laughed in his blood-marked face with pure joy, he raised the cheer that shook Small Hopes almost like an earthquake and would have rent the very dome above their heads, had it been one whit less elastic!

It was a perfect ovation, and for probably the first time since he attained the estate of manhood, Stormy Steve blushed before his fellow-men.

Yet there were a few exceptions to the general cheering.

Milo Tyrwhite had thoughts only for his loved one. He sunk on his knee, supporting her blood-stained head upon his arm and bosom. He tremblingly called to her by name—by the pet terms he had playfully invented in those bright and happy days before the storm-clouds fell between them. He believed her dead, yet persisted in calling her back to life.

Jason Verner, sick, trembling, dizzy, leaned against the wooden wall, with all a confused blur before his eyes. He was too terribly

shaken for the moment, to either cheer or curse.

Lying all unheeded in a growing puddle of gore, Hop Tanker gave forth no sound of rejoicing over his victor.

And there were two others who failed to unite their voices in that tremendous strain. One was lying in the dust, his right leg pinned fast beneath the body of his horse. The other was crouching with one knee planted on the head of the moaning animal, his eyes eagerly scanning the face from which his free hand had torn the black crape!

And Stormy Steve stood blushing like a bashful maiden, in the midst of the enthusiastic sports! He glanced hurriedly around him as though he meditated flight—he, the man whom no odds could daunt!

"Billy," he muttered, confidentially, bending his head, "I begin to feel sea-sick! As you love me, spout a little for the old man, while he slips off under cover of your honey-sweet tongue! Let me go look after your bar for you—do!"

But Billy laughingly declined, and Stormy Steve was forced to "face the music," which he did right gallantly, too!

Still Milo Tyrwhite heard nothing, saw nothing but Cedora Verner, and when she gave a shuddering sigh—when she opened her eyes and they met his passionate, yearning, love-full gaze—a cry of ineffable joy parted his lips before they touched hers in a clinging caress that seemed to blend their two souls into one delicious, perfect whole.

And Cedora clung to him closely, trustingly, the past black doubts forgotten. Like Milo, she forgot where they were—forgot all that had happened—remembered only that she was in the arms of the one man on all the wide earth to her!

Jason Verner saw this, and it acted on him more thoroughly than a dose of medicine. It gave him breath and strength, power to move and act and curse. For all the old hatred for the Tyrwhite family seemed to concentrate upon this young man who dared to touch the fruit forbidden him.

He left his support and approached them, his pale face filled with a stern and undying hatred, his voice harsh and vicious as he spoke lowly:

"Cedora, come with me. Mr. Tyrwhite, you are presuming too far. Have the goodness to release my child, and permit us to go our way, without being followed or spied upon."

It was a rude descent to earth and ordinary life, but Milo proved equal to the emergency. He rose to his feet, but his strong arm was still wound about the yielding waist of the maiden, and her head almost touched his heart.

Her silent confession still further enraged Jason Verner, and he grasped her arm, seeking to tear her away from Milo.

"Child, are you mad?" he almost hissed, in his rage. "You forget that we are in the open air, with curious eyes watching your foolish conduct. Come away from that wretch—his mere touch is contamination! Come away, I command you, child!"

"You are excited, Mr. Verner, and do not realize how weak and shaken Miss Verner is," said Milo, in a low but firm tone. "She has been injured—how badly I dare not even ask myself. She needs the aid and protection of a strong arm—"

"But not yours, you bare-faced scoundrel!" gratingly exclaimed Verner, increasing his efforts, only to have his wrist caught and twisted until a little cry of pain escaped him.

Milo Tyrwhite resolutely pushed him back, saying:

"You are only making a bad matter worse, Mr. Verner. I am determined to see Miss Verner safely back to the hotel, with or without your permission. You came between us once; you shall not do so now."

He turned to Cedora, who still clung to him, whispering:

"You are not afraid to trust me? You will accept my aid—at least as far as your hotel?"

"To the grave, if you say so, Milo!" she murmured.

And there was such perfect faith, such true and holy love in her tone and look that, caring naught for the rage-convulsed parent who watched them helplessly, Milo Tyrwhite again pressed her lips warmly.

"You impudent scoundrel! You shall pay for that, if it costs my life!" grated Jason Verner, longing to leap at the audacious lover's throat, but restrained from doing so by a painful conviction of his inferior strength and skill.

"There shall be a settlement of all accounts between us before long, Mr. Verner, and you can include that item in your little bill," half-laughed Milo, as he moved away from the spot where he believed he had found his long-lost happiness once more.

He moved away from the crowd surrounding Stormy Steve, for just then he particularly wished to avoid attracting any curious looks. Cedora made no resistance. She seemed willing to go with him where he saw fit to lead. And Jason Verner followed them closely, a murderous devil in his glowing eyes. And had he not been a physical coward to a certain degree, and

had he found a deadly weapon convenient to this hand, Milo Tyrwhite might have gone in search of his dead relatives that very night.

They passed around the corner of the saloon, making a brief circuit and regaining the main street, which led them to the front door of "The Sanctuary."

Just before they gained this refuge, they heard a wild uproar from the scene recently left behind; a pistol-shot, and then the peculiar slogan of Stormy Steve splitting the air.

Milo Tyrwhite paused with an involuntary glance in the direction from whence the sounds proceeded, and his voice was full of anxiety as he uttered:

"Fresh trouble! I sincerely hope that gallant fellow may come out of it all right! He saved you, my darling!"

"You are at liberty to go and aid your big ruffian, Mr. Tyrwhite," swiftly uttered Verner. "The hotel is close at hand, and we will trouble you no longer."

Milo Tyrwhite laughed shortly as he replied: "It is a pleasure, rather than a trouble, my dear sir."

"Call it what you please, but I bid you good-night, sir!"

The young man confronted him boldly, yet with a certain degree of respect in both voice and attitude.

"Mr. Verner, I have a good deal to say to both you and to your daughter. I mean to say those words this very night. Of course, if you positively decline to admit me to your rooms, I must submit; but in that case you must listen to me out here in the open air. Take your choice, please."

"I decline to have anything further to do with you," was the sullen reply. "You shamefully abused the trust I once reposed in you, and I'll never give you another chance."

Cedora gently freed herself from the lover's embrace, but it was not with the intention of deserting him then. Instead, she confronted her parent, almost defiantly.

"Father, I obeyed you once in a case like this, and I have suffered more than words can tell in consequence. I crushed down my heart, my reason, and refused to listen to his defense against those black charges. I thought it right that I should do so, since you commanded me; but now—with or without your consent, I am determined to hear him through—to listen to the other side of the story."

She turned to Milo and took his hand, moving toward the door of the hotel, saying:

"Come with me, Milo, and may kind Heaven make all clear once more between you and me!"

"Cedora—girl—I command you!" spluttered Jason Verner, almost beside himself with rage and mortification at this unexpected rebellion.

She turned swiftly upon him, her voice cold and hard:

"If your skirts are clear of sin, father, you should be glad to have this matter thoroughly understood!"

He said not a word, and as they entered the hotel, they again caught the wild slogan of the mad athlete:

"I'm Stormy Steve, and the Worst Pill in the Box!"

CHAPTER VII.

A BIRD THAT WON'T SING.

OLD Tom Moore, the Relic of '49, was not so busily engaged in making love to his decanter of whisky beneath the counter of Billy's Bower, but that he heard that terrified cry for aid in a feminine voice, and with a strange alacrity for one who seemed such a slave to liquor, he scrambled out from his refuge and joined in the excited stampede, without so much as a single long or covetous glance at the bright array of bottles he was leaving behind him.

He was one of the foremost by the time the building was fairly cleared, and when the mad athlete sent up his madder war-cry, there was but Milo Tyrwhite in advance of the Relic, despite the advanced years of the latter and the debilitating poison he had swallowed that night. Like the rest, Old Tom Moore stood aghast and watched the grapple of Stormy Steve with the mounted steed that sought to beat him down to death with its iron-shod hoofs; but then, when the mad athlete proved victorious, and the sports of Small Hopes were splitting the night air with their wildly-enthusiastic yells and cheers, the Relic employed himself far differently.

He had rounded the corner of Billy's Bower in time to see Hop Tanker hurled from the saddle by that heavy missile, and even while watching the unique struggle between man and animal, Old Tom Moore never entirely lost sight of the fallen rascal. And now, like one who felt his actions would not be noticed amid the wild enthusiasm, he scuffled hastily to the spot where the kidnapper lay, still and motionless, his body in the shadow, his head just coming within the line of bright moonlight.

He dropped to his knees and cast a swift, eager glance into the face of the kidnapper. Into what had once been a face, rather. Face it was not now; naught save a horrible mass of gore and pulpy flesh!

Such power and swiftness had that strong arm lent the rough stone—so true and deadly had been his aim—that if Hop Tanker had stood with his skull braced against a stone wall to receive the shock, the heavy missile could hardly have produced a more terrible effect. All semblance to humanity had been dashed out of that face forever. The skull was shattered like an egg-shell, and felt soft and pulpy beneath the quick touch of the Relic!

Little information was to be gleaned from Hop Tanker.

Kneeling thus beside the dead man, Old Tom Moore watched the events which immediately followed the overthrow of Bill Jones and his steed, his eyes glowing vividly in the semi-gloom, and strangely conflicting emotions altering the expression of his face.

It was not the mad athlete whom he was regarding so intently, nor yet the half-crazed Milo Tyrwhite just beyond; his gaze never shifted from the portion of the kidnapper visible from his present position. And when Jason Verner suddenly put in an appearance, his angry cry and the fierce repulse by the lover drawing the attention of Stormy Steve in that direction, the overthrown horse had hardly time to make a single effort to regain its feet after being relieved of the weight of the mad athlete, before the Relic crossed the intervening space and planted one knee upon its neck, holding its head to the ground with his right hand.

The instant he had the animal secured Old Tom Moore cast a swift, comprehensive glance around him. He saw that no one appeared to have noticed him or his movements. All attention was concentrated on Stormy Steve, who at that instant held Jason Verner high in the air, apparently on the point of hurling him down to meet death on the rocky ground at his feet.

Was it only curiosity that caused his left hand to shoot so swiftly, yet stealthily, toward the crape-hidden face of the prostrate kidnapper? Was it no more than curiosity that made his eyes glow and glitter so vividly as his nimble fingers tore away the disguising cloth?

A face deep-lined and stern, neither handsome nor hideous, that of a man apparently near the dividing line of life, for the short, heavy beard that nearly covered his face was thickly sprinkled with white hairs. A face such as one meets with every day of one's life without taking a second glance at it; but the Relic ground a savage oath between his teeth as he laid that face bare to the moonlight.

If actuated simply by curiosity, the ragged bummer had a very emphatic method of expressing that emotion.

Stormy Steve released Jason Verner with that peculiarly intoned apology, turning to receive the cordial greeting of Billy Ullman. The crowd took up the cheer which the owner of the Bower started, and under cover of the ovation which followed, the Verners and Milo Tyrwhite passed away from the scene.

The Relic still knelt on the neck of the overthrown horse, his strong right hand clutching its nostrils and holding it helpless; but his other hand was differently employed.

Was he ashamed to be caught playing the part of the Good Samaritan, that his actions were so stealthy, his sidelong glances so sly and anxious in the direction of the howling mass of half-wild sports?

With his left hand he drew a flat flask from his pocket, and knocking its neck off by a sharp tap against a point of rock that projected from the ground within easy reach, forgetting to leave a drunkard's sigh of regret over the few drops of whisky his hurried action wasted on the dry ground. And the most reckless spendthrift could not have made a more lavish use of the liquid poison in bathing the face of his dearest friend, than did the ragged bummer in striving to restore the kidnapper to consciousness.

Thanks to the persistence of Billy Ullman, Stormy Steve was affording him ample time for bringing that about.

"Gentlemen, friends, patrons, fellow citizens, countrymen, sports of Small Hopes and immense expectations!" cried the mad athlete, laughing, seeing that he must face the music or take to his heels like an arrant craven. "Suppose we change the programme for a moment or two? There isn't wind enough afloat this evening to supply all of our bellows, but if you will bridle your clappers, lend me your auriculars for a brief interval, I'll do my prettiest to show how picayunishly-mean and country-lad bashful this way-up demonstration of yours is making me feel!"

"I've toted green pumpkins two miles on a dark night through a rose-brier and dogwood scrub before discovering the humiliating truth instead of ripe watermelons. I've followed the trail of a trim and graceful figure for an hour, only to catch a glimpse of a face black as the deepest frown of a stormy midnight. I've called up all the sports in a high-toned saloon, and seen them supplied with coffin-nails, before I realized that my weasel-skin had vanished with every red cent, and been bounced as a dead-beat of the first class. All these, and many more—but I never felt so much like crawling way down into the toes of my brogans, as I do this identical minute!"

"You've done nothing to be ashamed of, old man!" cried Billy Ullman, heartily.

"I know it—and that's just exactly what makes me feel so like a fish out of its natural element," laughed the mad athlete. "This is my night as Stormy Steve, and as the Human Cyclone I've got no earthly right to do, say, or even *think* anything creditable, for I'm the Worst Pill in the Box—made of prussic acid, covered with strychnine and sugar-coated with arsenic!"

"Gentlemen all! If the rosy dawn should show you the noble figure of Stormy Steve hanging head-up under a sour apple tree, with his boiler burst wide open, you can make your verdict accordingly. Cut off in his prime because he let the scream of a woman knock the dunce-block from under his feet and the cap and bells from his empty pate! Plant the old man as deep as you dare go for fear of prematurely striking fire, and set those two sweet-scented posies yonder up at the head and foot of the mound, as guide-boards for Old Scratch when—"

Meanwhile the Relic was lavishly using his whisky, casting alternate glances toward the crowd listening to the exaggerated speech of Stormy Steve and back to the dark face of the kidnapper. And he drew a quick, rasping breath as he saw the lids unclosed and a pair of dark eyes flash wonderingly up into his—then fill with a savage glitter and glow!

"You're 'live—live enough to pull hemp, ain't ye?" he muttered hoarsely, as he saw one hand of the kidnapper move toward his waist where a revolver still remained in its holster. "An' *thar's the hangman*—you kin hear him spout-in!"

He glanced quickly toward the mad athlete, who was just alluding to the two kidnappers, as recorded. He saw that more than one pair of eyes were directed toward the spot where he still knelt on the neck of the struggling horse, and—

A spluttering cry and curse burst from his lips as his ragged figure rose into the air, turning head down and heels up, like some clumsy imitation of a crippled frog! And the snorting horse scrambled to its feet and dashed off with a wild neigh! And a tattered, dust-covered form rose from the ground, revolver in hand, fierce oaths breaking from his lips!

A warning yell came from Billy Ullman, cutting short the speech of Stormy Steve, but before the mad athlete could understand what was wrong, there came a sharp report and he gave a quick, unsteady reel to one side as though sharply hit!

"Down goes *your* house, devil!" yelled Bill Jones; but he had time granted him neither sufficient to flee nor to fire another dastard shot.

A heavy shock flung him forward on his hands and knees, and bony fingers twined themselves about his throat, as a high and shrill voice pealed out excitedly:

"I ketched him! I call you all to b'ar witness that I ketched him! He's *my* meat, an' what money he'll fetch in the law-market, b'longs to me, 'vidually myself!"

He had time for no more than that.

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!" thundered the mad athlete as he covered the intervening space in two enormous bounds.

He caught the Relic by neck and hip, flinging him away from the kidnapper as though his weight was no more than that of a bundle of straw.

"Gag the fellow, some of you—he makes me tired!"

Stormy Steve sharply uttered those words as he stooped and picked up the kidnapper. A single twist of the wrist made him drop his revolver with a groan of agony. One strong hand brought both of his wrists together, holding them as in a vise. And tucking the rascal under his arm, Stormy Steve strode rapidly around the corner and in at the front entrance to Billy's Bower, followed by the excited yet awe-stricken crowd.

But the Relic was not so easily daunted or silenced. He scrambled to his feet without apparent injury, and was close at the heels of Stormy Steve as he entered the saloon. And as he lowered his captive to the floor, holding him up with an iron grip until he could fairly "feel his feet," Old Tom Moore tapped his shoulder, dodging ludicrously as the mad athlete turned a scowling glare upon him, but whining:

"I ketched him, didn't I? On'y fer me, he'd 'a' got clean off, wouldn't he? I ax you as man to man—*wouldn't* he, now?"

"What do you want?"

"My jest rights, an' not a grain more then them," was the prompt reply. "I ketched the critter—leave it to the gang ef I didn't, now. I ketched him, an' he's my meat, by rights, to turn over to the law and collect the money, ef they's any reward hung up fer him—an' his ugly mug says *they is*!"

"When I am done with him, you can have him in welcome," Stormy Steve laughed; but it was a laugh that chilled even the blood of the hardened, sullen desperado who had not yet fully recovered from that paralyzing grip.

"But durn it all!" whined the Relic, dolefully, "they won't pay fer dead meat, like as not!"

Don't I know the tricks o' the trade? Ain't I see'd all its workin's, out in 'Forny? A cold road-agent ain't no better then any other man, an' fer that reason, I say you've got to hold on to the live critter ontel I kin collect the head-money—fer I ketcht him; now I putt it to you white: *didn't I ketch him?*"

"If you did, you first turned him loose," was the cold, stern retort. "Fall back and bridle that tongue of yours, or you may chance to catch something else that will not be so easily repeated by your tongue, nimble as it is now!"

"Billy," and he turned toward Ullman, all traces of the wild extravagance which had marked the conduct and tones of the mad athlete vanishing, "will you please act as overseer for a few minutes? Close the doors, and maintain order, if you have to call on your sixes to aid you. I ask it as a friend, as well as in the interests of law and order."

"Billy and his Bower are yours to command, pard!" promptly responded Ullman, as he strode to the entrance and fastened the door.

"And you, gents, don't want to forget that I'm better at acting than I am at wagging my tongue. Kick up a row, and there'll be enough cold meat in here to set up a first-class butcher shop in the morning. I say it!"

There was no response in words, but the Relic uttered a subdued groan, and humbly crept around the end of the bar and took up his station out of sight with his "musical instrument" and yet well-supplied decanter.

Leaving all the rest to watchful Billy, Stormy Steve turned his attention to the kidnapper, now partially recovered from the shock, sullen and defiant.

Stormy Steve gazed keenly, searchingly into his face.

It was covered with dust and blood, but enough could be seen to convince all who looked at him then that he was a stranger in Small Hopes, and a man who was used to wild life and wilder experiences. A sullen, dogged glow showed in his small eyes. His square jaws were firmly set, his thin nostrils dilated, his nose looking white and pinched at the tip. Clearly, he had nerved himself to bear the worst that might come.

"Who are you?" sharply demanded Stormy Steve.

"A man, half-white and free-born!" was the prompt reply.

"What is your name, and where do you hail from?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out—if you can."

"Touch it lightly, my man," was the stern-voiced warning. "Impudence won't save your throat this time."

"Will anything else?" swiftly demanded the kidnapper.

"A full and frank confession will go far toward it, at any rate."

"Bah!" and the fellow laughed hardly, almost contemptuously. "You're making a terrible rumpus over a trifle. Suppose I did try to run off with a woman? You can't twist that into a hanging affair. It isn't as though I'd knocked a man in the head, or run off with another fellow's burro."

"You'll find it's much more serious than anything of the sort you hint at. Women don't grow on every bush in these parts, and there's not an honest heart within hearing of my voice who has forgotten his mother, his sister or sweetheart!"

A subdued but earnest muttering ran around the room. But for Billy Ullman, with his pair of cocked sixes, that mutter would have grown into a roar fit to lift the roof.

The kidnapper cast a swift glance around the crowd at that threatening sound, and his nose looked more pinched, his eyes glowed redder than ever as he read aright the dark and menacing scowls he saw there. He knew that his neck was in imminent danger of feeling a collar of hemp.

But he was gritty, let his faults be black as they might, and he never flinched even when Stormy Steve added:

"You would have saved both time and trouble had you put the muzzle of a six between your teeth and blown your brains to the four winds, before coming to Small Hopes to abuse a woman! That means death—but there are deaths and deaths!"

"I reckon it all comes to the same thing in the end," the kidnapper muttered, with a sickly smile. "You can't do any more than kill me, at the worst!"

"Don't you flatter yourself with that belief, my good fellow," retorted Stormy Steve, showing his white teeth. "I can make death like going to sleep on a bed of rose-leaves, in comparison with the send-off I can give you, if you drive me to extremities with your dogged obstinacy!"

Despite his bulldog nerve, it was plain to be seen that the prisoner was impressed with the cold earnestness with which Stormy Steve uttered these words. He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, casting a swift, furtive glance around him, as though ready to take desperate chances should he see the faintest opening for an escape by a sudden dash.

But even the wildest desperation could see nothing of the kind. Stormy Steve had him within easy reach. A score of stern, frowning men were watching his slightest movement, their hands ready to grasp weapon in case of need. Escape was impossible, and their remained nothing for him but to face the consequence of his outrage as boldly as might be.

"You've got me foul, and I suppose I've got to take what you measure out to me," he said, sullenly, yet with a greater degree of nerve and coolness than most men would have been able to show under similar circumstances. "One thing; you can't make me forget that I'm a man, clean to the backbone!"

His pluck plainly impressed the mad athlete, but the effect was no sooner to be noted than it was gone. His voice was hard and cold as steel as he spoke again.

"Once more I ask you who you are? What is your name? Why did you assault the lady? Who hired you to commit this dastardly outrage?"

The kidnapper met that steely gaze for a moment, then his eyes drooped; but his lips came together more tightly than ever, and never a word spoke he.

Stormy Steve thrust out one hand and with his fingers beneath the fellow's chin, forced him to lift his head until their eyes met fairly.

"You heard my questions. I asked them for a purpose. I expect a reply to each and all of them. Will you give those answers without further delay, or shall I oil up your tongue by using one of the dainty little patents I hinted at?"

"What good will talking do me?" was the sullen retort. "You say it's a death-matter, anyhow."

"I'm not arguing the case with you," was the sharp reply. "I'm bidding you speak out. If you refuse again, your last chance is gone. Better make the most of it, I warn you!"

"Promise that you'll let me go free, if I tell all I know, and maybe my tongue will limber up a little."

"I make no terms with you. I simply advise you to make a clean breast of the matter, and let the end take care of itself. By refusing to speak, you can only make your punishment the more severe by prolonging it. Come! sing or croak!" the mad athlete uttered, hardily, his blue eyes glowing as though filled with molten steel.

"My name's Bill Jones, if you will have it!" sullenly muttered the kidnapper.

"Good enough, as far as it goes. Pray continue the tune, my black-faced canary!" smiled Stormy Steve.

The kidnapper shuddered despite his nerve, as he noted that smile. It was more terrible than a frown of hottest rage.

"The man you killed was Hop Tanker. He and I just struck these parts, looking for an opening where a little dust might be made by strong and willing hands. We had been hitting the bottle pretty often, and were just a little off our base when we got here. And—well, you know the rest."

"We will, when you have finished your tune. Sing on, Sweet William. You've hardly begun your song as yet!"

A sudden desperation seemed to seize upon the prisoner, and with flaming eyes and hard, defiant tones he growled:

"I've sung my last note at your bidding, curse you! Do your worst! It'll come to that in the end, anyhow, and the sooner you get down to solid business, the quicker it will end!"

Stormy Steve flamed out like a flash of powder, one hand clutching the sullen villain by the throat as he turned his face toward Billy Ullman, grating savagely:

"Get a rope of some sort, and we'll see if this ugly rascal means all he threatens! Lively! or I'll lose control of myself and tear him limb from limb with my naked hands!"

Ullman leaped to obey the order, and a muttering, low at first, but gaining as it spread, until it became a cry terrible and deadly enough to send the warm blood chilling to the heart of the boldest man living if he knew it was directed against him—the cry for blood.

"Hang him—lynch him—string him high as Haman!"

And blending with the mad roar, there came the wailing, groaning, discordant screech of the Relic's fiddle, so sudden and unexpected that it startled the crowd into silence, as though the wand of a magician had been waved above their heads:

"Jest a little bit sence, I struck a lead,
Of ore on two laigs;
But fore I hed time to count out my chicks,
Stormy Steve bu'sted up all the aigs!
'Twas a rare ole settin', an' I'm a-bettin',
A fortune would 'a' bin mine,
But the lead's petered out, 'thout the ghost of a
doubt,
This night o' '79!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A TIGHT NOOSE MAKES A GLIB TONGUE.

"An' that's the Gospel truth ef it does go a little oneven on its two trotters—wuss luck!" It was a truly doleful combination of wretch-

edness, disappointment and resigned humility, followed closely by the musical gurgle-gurgle of whisky through the neck of the decanter; but the effect which his doggerel had produced once, it failed to produce in this instance. Then it was but a mock-storm; now it was the cyclone of death.

Stormy Steve flashed a hot glance toward the barkeeper who still stood at his place behind the bar, and grated:

"Johnny, smash that infernal music-box, will you?"

There came a muffled howl from the Relic, but Johnny was too prompt in his movements, and snatching up the rude instrument, he brought it down on the shaggy head of its owner with such a good will that it flew into a hundred pieces.

"Serves ye mighty right for taking up space that belongs to your betters, ye two-legged junk-shop! Quit your howling, or by the piper that played before Moses! I'll ram the bow down your throat until it pushes the boots off o' ye!"

Johnny was hot, to put it mildly. A daintily-clad and fashionably-perfumed "bar ornament" was he, and the intrusion of this ill-favored and worse-savored bummer, even though it came about through higher authority, cut him to the very quick.

More wretched-looking than ever, the Relic crawled out of his refuge that seemed so secure, but which had failed to protect him from bodily and mental anguish. With a whining groan he held up the pine neck of his dearly-beloved instrument of torture, the knotted strings dangling, mute forevermore!

"Wuss an' wuss, an' more of it! I didn't think it o' you, Johnny!" with a mournful shake and reproachful wag of his unkempt head. "You, livin' an' breathin' your hull life 'mongst sech way-up p'izen as them! With the odors that double discount Araby the Blest, fill-in' your smellin' factories from snowy morn to sunny eve! To go an' smash the last joy an' consolation the ole man hed left—an' him one o' the 'riginal Argonauts o' the days o' '49!"

A monstrous sigh he heaved, then added with a truly meek and mournful resignation:

"Waal, them what hev must lose!"

Was it genuine grief that moved the Relic? Or did he still hope to carry his point by making the crowd laugh instead of lynching?

If the last, he shot wide of the mark. Stormy Steve listened to his doleful plaint without a line of his blood-marked countenance softening. "Johnny, give the howler a fair grab at the treasury so he can buy him another mechanical cat if he likes; but if he chips in again without a special invitation, kick him out here and I'll send him on his way—silent, if not rejoicing!"

He did not take the trouble to see how Johnny performed this duty, but cast an impatient glance toward Billy Ullman.

"Don't be so particular, Billy boy! I can make a spider's web do if it's long enough to double and twist!"

During all this time, Stormy Steve held Bill Jones with that mighty grip, and though the surly kidnapper felt that his evil race was well-nigh run, he knew that escape was impossible from that terrible clutch. If the mad athlete was only out of the way!

His bloodshot eyes went down to the waist of his captor, for the moment forgetting that Stormy Steve wore no weapons. The Human Cyclone intercepted that glance, and rightly interpreted its meaning. A short, hard laugh parted his lips.

"Not this evening, Billy. Perhaps, some other evening—in another clime! No doubt you would just bubble over with pure delight at the chance to make an angel out of yours truly, but even so, there are too many deputy cherubims standing between you and freedom to make the effort really worth while. You've made your choice, and now you want to stand up to the rack and take your fodder like a little lamb!"

A cheerful voice, a playful manner; but it was the dangerous playing of a tiger, and it seemed to shake the prisoner more than the fiercest threats.

"It don't look right to crowd a man so close to the wall for nothing more than a drunken frolic, boss!" he muttered, his tones husky, his fingers twitching nervously.

"If your throat closes up and your neck telescopes until it is longer than a giraffe's before you finish your song, you have only yourself to blame, Bill Jones," deliberately retorted Stormy Steve, his big blue eyes keenly watching the changes in the face of the kidnapper.

"If a man don't understand music, he can't sing by note, can he?" with a brief, venomous glance upward.

"You've got to, or suffer the consequences for neglecting your musical education, Billy."

"What is it you expect me to say?" muttered Jones.

"The plain, straightforward truth, with never a slip or a step to the left hand or the right!" was the swift reply. "If you do—up you go for a mid-air dance on nothing!"

"It was the pure quill I gave you when I did talk," was the hasty response, and those who watched and listened began to believe that the

kidnapper was growing weak in the knees at last. "My name is Bill Jones. I came last from down San Juan-wards. The fellow with me was Hop Tanker. We'd been drinking a little too freely, and when we struck the camp, were all ripe for a frolic."

"All this you said before, Billy," warned Stormy Steve, his face growing harder, his eyes fairly ablaze.

"It was the truth, so of course I said it the same way when you first asked me," doggedly uttered the prisoner.

"It's to be hoped you'll put in some fresh notes before long, Billy—for the good of your neck!"

"I won't tell a lie, even to please you!" snarled Jones, surlily. "I'll make a clean breast of it, but if you want it any worse than it happened, you must do the cooking yourself."

"Go on," shortly ejaculated Stormy Steve.

"We ran across a woman. In the moonlight, we took her for an old acquaintance; Short-and-Dirty, 's her pet name. Hop danced to her after the old fashion, but she flew the track like a skittish colt. I know now that she was frightened, but at the time we both believed it was only a put-on of Shorty's, and the bad whisky made Hop pick her up and break for the hills. Of course I could do nothing but follow him."

A hard, ugly laugh parted the red lips of the mad athlete as he stared fiercely into the eyes of his prisoner.

"You think that will go down without gagging me? Bah! you miserable, lying scoundrel! Every word you have uttered about mistaking the lady for your light-o'-love is a lie as rotten and hollow as your own heart! You knew who she was, well enough! You were looking for her, and for none other! You were not drunk—you were cool and clear-witted as I am now, for you knew that you were meddling with edged tools—that failure or discovery meant death to you both!"

"If you won't believe the truth when you hear it—"

"I am speaking the truth to you now, Bill Jones! I tell you your life is hanging by a thread so fine that a single touch will sever it and hurl you down to the pit prepared for just such vile vermin as you have proved yourself! I'm a fool for wasting any further words on you, but I'll give you one more chance."

"You were hired and paid for this evil work. You were employed to abduct Miss Verner. Now—who put you on the track? Why did he wish to obtain possession of the lady? When and where were you to meet the head villain, if your evil plan proved successful?"

The kidnapper hesitated for a brief space, and it seemed as though he was about to make full confession as the last hope of escaping death at the hands of the merciless athlete.

He glanced around the room from beneath his contracted brows. His lips opened and closed with an audible sound. His chest heaved convulsively for a few moments. But then he uttered a savage, sullen growl and muttered:

"I've done my level best to please you. I've given you the straight tip, but if it don't suit you, why—"

"It's a lie on the face of it, and you needn't take the trouble to repeat it," hardly interrupted Stormy Steve, turning his head toward Billy Ullman, with a nod.

The proprietor of the Bower advanced, and at a silent order from Stormy Steve, slipped a noose over the head of the kidnapper, drawing it snug and even about his throat, with the smooth knot in the orthodox position, just back of the left ear. Then, with an inquiring look into the face of the chief master of ceremonies, he uttered:

"Shall the boys take him in charge? There's a tree will serve all purposes out at the lower end, you know."

Stormy Steve shook his lion-head, took the coil of slender but tough rope from Ullman, leaping lightly upon the bar.

The coil of rope was flung over his left arm and rested on his shoulder. He stooped over and wound the loose line, twice around his right hand, bringing that member close to the top of the doomed wretch's head. A short, vicious laugh broke from his lips as he caught the curious, puzzled glances which passed around the room, and he said:

"It's something like running the profession into a purely mechanical channel, but in the absence of any other, here's a limb that can play the part of a gallows!"

He suddenly drew his magnificent frame upright. His right arm grew stiff and rigid, slowly rising to a horizontal position, bringing with it the writhing weight of the doomed kidnapper!

It was a strange, even blood-curdling sight!

There were few men present who were not familiar with scenes of violence and sudden death. Some among them had more than once steeped their hands and blackened their souls with the blood of fellow-beings shot or cut down in the wild, hot frenzy of drink or gambling. But even they turned pale and felt the cold chills creeping along their spinal marrow as they witnessed this exhibition—at once marvelous and revolting.

Bill Jones was no light weight, but Stormy Steve held him suspended at arm's length without the slightest apparent difficulty or straining. His right arm kept its level without even quivering or shaking as the choking wretch struggled and writhed, gasping horribly as his hands went up and met around that steel-sinewed wrist, partially relieving the suffocating grip on his windpipe.

As a simple exhibition of muscular power, it was magnificent in the extreme; but who could view it in that mild light with that frightfully writhing figure before their eyes, desperately, vainly fighting for life?

But Stormy Steve was merciless, just then, and right well he deserved the title that rent the air—

"I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

And with a swift motion of his body and left hand, he freed his wrist from those desperate fingers. Higher rose that wonderful right arm! Up, until the purpled, swollen face of the doomed man was on a level with his own as it slowly swung around until the two almost came in contact.

Keenly, intently the big blue eyes stared into those opposite them, then Stormy Steve lowered the kidnapper until his limp and nerveless feet touched the sanded floor, leaping himself from the counter and deftly catching the body before it could fall over.

There was an impulsive movement toward him by the spectators, but Stormy Steve flashed a menacing look upon them.

"Keep your distance, gentlemen, and we'll be more apt to get along without quarreling. Billy, I look to you."

That was sufficient, even for old Tom Moore, who had been one of the most interested witnesses of the lynching on the gallows of flesh and blood. He caught the wicked glitter of Billy Ullman's blue eye, and he shrunk back meekly; but his gaze never left the distorted countenance of Bill Jones, until it was hidden from his view by the broad bulk of the athlete.

"A sup of your best, Johnny!" cried Stormy Steve, supporting the senseless figure across his hip, still staring keenly, it seemed anxiously, into his protruding, bloodshot eyes.

The liquor was promptly supplied, and a portion dashed violently into the purpled face of the kidnapper. A few drops were poured into the partially opened mouth, and after a brief space of almost breathless suspense on the part of those who witnessed the strange drama, a faint, gasping sound came from the slowly inflating lungs of the poor devil. He moaned, gasped, shivered, clutched at the empty air—then the light of life and returning reason came back to his eyes!

Stormy Steve deftly removed the noose from about his neck, and tossed it to Billy Ullman, saying shortly:

"Keep it handy, pard, though I hardly think it will be necessary to call it into play right off. One such dose generally effects a cure, even in a stubborn case like this!"

Bill Jones heard that voice, and seemed to recognize it. He shivered from crown to sole; a husky, rattling sound in his throat might be interpreted as an appeal for mercy. So at least Stormy Steve chose to accept it, for he spoke in clear and deliberate accents:

"It rests entirely with you, my dear fellow! Sing true to nature, and bear in mind that the fewer false notes you insert, the better chance you will have of dying of old age!"

"Mercy—pity—I've suffered ten thousand deaths!" the weak and unmanned kidnapper huskily gasped, his words barely audible even to the keen and eager ears of the mad athlete.

"Are you ready to make a clean breast of it, then? Or do you want to give these gentlemen another free exhibition of your skill on the tight-rope?" sharply demanded Hasbrook.

"Anything—I'll confess—only don't—don't—"

His voice died away, and his momentarily stiffened muscles grew limp and helpless. He would have sunk to the floor in a nerveless heap, but for the sustaining arm which Stormy Steve brought into use.

"It's all right, Billy," the mad athlete laughed, with a strangely exultant glance toward his right bower for the occasion. "You can stow away that patent persuader of yours, until another time. And just make this fellow up a red-hot eye-opener, will you? His backbone is sadly in need of stiffening."

Billy Ullman promptly flung the rope coil behind the bar and followed it himself, handling bottles and glasses with the nimble dexterity attained only by long practice and a natural aptitude for the "profession."

Old Tom Moore crept slowly, slyly, timidly as it seemed, to one side from whence he could obtain a fair view of the insensible kidnapper's face. There was a strange, eager look in his gray eyes, his face, his attitude, his every move and gesture. Whatever the cause, he was seriously interested.

As Billy Ullman came around the bar with his "red-hot" decoction in a glass, Stormy Steve partially lowered his prisoner, allowing his head to droop across one bended leg. With a firm, dexterous touch, he unlocked the rigid jaws, and held the discolored lips apart sufficiently for Billy to pour the dram, little by little,

into the kidnapper's mouth. There was a slight, convulsive movement of the throat; then the liquor ran down his throat, and Stormy Steve once more raised the fellow upright.

The potent draught quickly produced its desired effect, and once more Bill Jones looked dizzily, wildly about him.

The ordeal had been a terrible one, the shock to his system very severe; but he was no "spring chicken," and rapidly recovered his senses, though his strength was slower in coming back to him.

Stormy Steve watched him keenly and patiently until his shrewd judgment told him the proper moment had arrived. He did not want the desperate fellow to fully recover his powers of either body or mind, for he felt that the truth would come all the more readily if the kidnapper was still suffering.

"Now, my gentle canary, the quicker you tune your pipes to give out the song we've been waiting for so patiently, the sooner the concert will be over and the curtain rung down," he said, in a soft tone that did not at all disguise his stern resolve to rest satisfied with nothing less than the entire truth. "You lied to me when you swore you and your pard mistook Miss Verner for an old acquaintance of yours?"

"Yes, I lied," muttered the cowed rascal, supporting himself against the bar, his bloodshot eyes sedulously avoiding those great, glowing orbs of steely blue.

"You came to Small Hopes expressly to abduct the lady?"

The prisoner shook his head. Stormy Steve frowned blackly, a warning growl rumbling through his clinched teeth. Bill Jones flashed a swift glance into his face, then drooped his eyes again as he added:

"I'm going to tell you the truth. It is the truth that we didn't come here expressly with the intention of abducting that lady, for that was only a part of our object, and was to be done only if the opportunity presented itself without any especial exertion on our part."

"That sounds more like it. Keep to the score as well as you've begun, and you may turn out a high-up prima donna yet!" laughed Stormy Steve, lightly. "Next line; were you doing this as a personal speculation, or on account of some other fellow?"

"You know we were hired to do it," sullenly.

"I know it?" echoed Stormy Steve, in mock surprise. "How should I know it? If I knew, why should I take so much trouble to make you chirp straight?"

"You wouldn't believe me when I swore we weren't hired."

"Because I read a lie in your face, just as I shall catch you in another if you dare attempt to fool me. Go on. Tell your story in as few words as you can, with a due regard to clearness. If I catch you tripping, up you go—and to stay!"

Bill Jones perceptibly shivered at this significant termination, and one hand mechanically stole up to his painfully sore throat. Then, with his bloodshot eyes roving anywhere but on the face of Stormy Steve, he spoke:

"Neither Hop nor I have led a very saintly life, the past few years, though I dare say you might stumble over worse without wearing out more than one pair of heavy boots in the hunt. And so, when a man came to us and said if we would do his work right, it would put gold in our clothes, we didn't ask him for a recommendation from more than one Gospel sharp!"

"Get down to business, Billy!" coldly interposed Steve.

"That was the way we came to get in with the man who hired us. We didn't know who he was for a bit, even then, but before we struck out to do the job, he told us he was known up this way as Private John Smith, chief of the Awkward Squad!"

There was an excited muttering among the crowd at these words. The name mentioned was that of a very matter-of-fact road-agent who had gained not a little notoriety of late by his daring exploits in that section of Silver-land.

Stormy Steve held up a hand, and all was silence.

"He told us of Jason Verner and his daughter. He even pointed them out to us one evening as they stopped for the night. He told us they were bound for Small Hopes, where we were to follow them, to watch their every movement, to note all who sought them out, and if possible, to eavesdrop their talk."

"If we got a chance to abduct the lady, without running too much risk of discovery, we were to do it. If we succeeded, it was to be worth five hundred scads to us. We were to take her to a secure retreat in the broken country, and hold her safely until we saw him, when he would relieve us for good."

"Where was he to meet you?" hastily demanded Stormy Steve, for the first time seeming to lose his iron self-control.

"Here in Small Hopes," was the prompt reply.

"At what time? Openly, or in disguise?"

"He set no time," slowly uttered Jones, stealing a sly glance into the excited face of the athlete. "He said if we succeeded in abducting the lady, for one of us to remain with her in the

hills, while the other stopped here, until he came. He did not say how he would come, nor when."

"Go on," coldly uttered Stormy Steve as the fellow paused again.

"I've finished, and what more can I tell?" surlily.

Stormy Steve looked him square in the eyes, holding those bloodshot orbs as though by fascination as he slowly said:

"Bill Jones, your life is forfeited by all the laws of manhood and honor; but if you will do one thing more, I'll promise you both life and liberty. Refuse, or attempt to deceive me, and salt won't keep you from spoiling! You comprehend?"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Set me face to face with this Private John Smith!"

The gaze of the kidnapper broke away from that burning stare, and his eyes roved slowly over the eager spectators, as though he was carefully weighing the matter in his mind. Then an evil light leaped into his eyes, and he cried:

"I'll do it! I'll trust to your word of honor to set me at liberty without further torture! There stands Private John Smith! He could have set me free, but he captured me instead—hell's blackest curses forever blast him, body and soul!"

He pointed direct to Old Tom Moore, who gasped:

"Holy Patriarchs! what a liar!" then leaped through the broken window with a marvelous activity in one so old!

CHAPTER IX.

NO COMPROMISE.

It was in anything but an angelic mood that Jason Verner entered "The Sanctuary" that night, preceded by his daughter and Milo Tyrwhite.

He was a "good hater." When the number of Tyrwhites lessened under the touch of death Jason Verner nodded in grim approval as he marked their names from his black book with an emphatic cross of jet; but he did not allow them to carry to the grave with them their share of his dislike and hatred. When this could no longer affect them in any way, Jason Verner transferred it to the living; and thus, as the years passed on, the entire accumulation of venom had but one mark in view, with a possible second should the long missing Albus Tyrwhite ever turn up again.

It had been a bitter blow for him when he discovered that his only child had fallen in love with the son and heir of the man whom he then hated worse than death itself. He had forced himself to consent, on conditions which he secretly believed proud James Tyrwhite would never submit to. And when those conditions were fulfilled, his crafty brain was busied night and day with schemings the main end of which was to free his child and bring sorrow and shame on the heads of his hated foes.

The battle was won, he believed forever; at a heavy cost, even he was forced to admit to his secret self, when he saw how feverish and unnatural was the life led by his idolized child; won—but now?

Was it all to be fought over again? If so, he would show no quarter, although he could not avoid feeling that the odds were heavily against him as he saw how tenderly, how trustingly Cedora allowed her little hand to be clasped in the warm palm of her one-time betrothed, even as they passed along the lighted passage at the side of the bar-room, leading to the one "parlor" which the Sanctuary boasted.

Cedora Verner led the way into the room which she had left an hour earlier on such a sudden and blind impulse. Milo Tyrwhite followed, and Jason Verner brought up the rear, his gaunt face hard and uncompromising as he cast his hat aside and sunk into the only pretense at an easy-chair the room afforded. And his voice was harder even than his face as he glanced from Cedora to Milo and back again, saying:

"Bear in mind that I have tried to avoid this useless interview, knowing as I do that it can in no wise change the past. That is dead, past all hope of resurrection. If you were not to the full as impudent and shameless as you are without manhood or principle, Milo Tyrwhite, you too would see and understand this; you, child, would be too proud to even dream of stooping so low as to reach the level he stands on, if your poor brain had not suffered so terribly this night!"

"Father," replied Cedora, her face pale, her voice low, but filled with a degree of resolution that still further startled him. "Father, I begin to feel that my brain is growing clear and rational for the first time in over a year. Since that black, terrible hour, I have been living in a trance, seeing with your eyes, hearing with your ears, speaking through your lips; but now—now, I must see, hear, speak for myself! I must know all, without the slightest concealment or glossing over! And how can that be unless I hear both sides of the story? Unless I hear Milo Tyrwhite at least attempt to explain the cruel charges which were brought against him?"

"He has had more than a year in which to ar-

range his story, and to smooth over the knottiest points," sneered Jason Verner, with undisguised malignance. "The woman is no longer here to correct him when he strays from the beaten track—to confront his lies with the black and shameful truth!"

"Nor was he present when she told her story, father!" the fair advocate quickly interjected. "One side of the picture satisfied you then, and—"

"You also believed it!"

"I was nearly crazed. I knew not what I did, then. For the time being, I was not responsible for my actions, as none know better than you, father!" brokenly replied the maiden, her eyes suffused with tears, but which she resolutely banished as she summoned her courage and resolution once more to her aid.

"One wrong will not make amends for another. You and I both condemned Milo Tyrwhite unheard. That was a year ago and more. It is late in the day to make amends, but when he clears himself from that vile charge—I do not say if, for I know in my heart that he is innocent of all wrongdoing!—there is no penance he can impose on me that will be too heavy or painful, unless—unless—"

Her voice faltered and she broke down without completing the passionately begun sentence. Through it all Milo Tyrwhite had watched her keenly, as only a recently-despairing lover could watch the returning light of hope. He saw something in her eyes, heard something quavering in her tones, that made him spring forward and drop to one knee at her feet, as his hands caught one of hers, pressing it almost painfully as he said:

"Unless—what, Cedora?"

Her averted face turned toward his, her blue eyes gazed for a brief space into those sparkling orbs of jet as though striving to look into the secret recesses of his brain. Then her golden-crowned head bent lower and a gentle murmur parted her lips, forming the simple words:

"Unless you were to condemn me to live on as I have lived this past year—hopeless and despairing!"

Not so much in themselves, those words; but taken in connection with that trustful gaze, they filled the hungry heart of the lover to overflowing, and forgetting that the cold and unfriendly eyes of Jason Verner were upon them, he sprang to his feet, caught the yielding form of the maiden to his breast and rained hot kisses on her lips, her cheeks, her eyes.

With a grating curse Jason Verner sprang from his chair and strode toward them, but before his quivering fingers could close upon his child, Milo Tyrwhite firmly repulsed him.

"Not even a parent has the right to step between betrothed lovers with violence, Mr. Verner."

"She is nothing to you, you scoundrel!" grated the old man, almost suffocating with rage, but falling back a little from that strong, steady hand. "She cast you off when she found you out in your true colors, and if you had a spark of manhood or decency about you, body or soul, you would be ashamed to come fawning around her again! Betrothed? you lie when you say it! She is nothing to you—she never shall be aught to you!"

"She is still my promised wife," was the quiet reply. "I never accepted her written dismissal—if her hand really formed those cruel characters! I never will accept it, without hearing and seeing her sweet lips pronounce the fiat. Then—when she bids me go, I will obey. But until then, no man or number of men can make me resign my claims on her love."

Bold words, in the face of what had happened in the past, in the face of the father who hated him so intensely; but Milo Tyrwhite felt in that tender yet ardent touch, silent yet so eloquent, an inspiration that made him sure of his cause.

Jason Verner seemed to comprehend that he must do battle with them both, if he was to win again; and this belief helped to restore his wonted cold composure. He turned away from the reunited lovers and resumed his seat.

"Enough of heroics, for the present," he said, his voice harder and colder than customary even for him in his sourest moods. "If you two silly fools choose to forget that we are in a public house and in a strange land, I cannot. As I do not choose to make my private affairs the gossip of the town, I will wait until my daughter remembers what is due to both her father and herself."

It was a hard and cruel speech to make, and Cedora turned from blushes to pallor as she gently freed herself from the ardent embrace of her lover and retreated to a chair beside the table. A silent gesture from her moved Milo Tyrwhite to follow her example.

Jason Verner bowed ironically. He felt that he had won at least the first move in the game about to be played.

He lost little time in coming to the point. Coldly, almost malignantly, one might say, he opened the black charges which had been brought against Milo Tyrwhite in the past. He spoke in low and guarded tones, for even he did not wish any curious outsiders to learn aught of the troubled story, but he made no further concession. He told the whole revolting story of

treachery, cruelty, cold-bloodedness, as he viewed it from his standpoint. In his desire to wound and injure one of the race he hated so intensely, he cared nothing for the wound he was inflicting on his own child.

It was hard for Milo Tyrwhite to sit silent and listen to the black record spread before him, and only his renewed faith in the love of Cedora enabled him to keep his seat and hear the charge to the end. But then—

It would be difficult to reproduce his defense in print, and even should it be spread before the reader, word for word, it would still be incomplete without his earnest tones, his noble bearing, his eloquent gestures. It was a defense such as only a gifted mind could make for more than life—for honor.

Cedora listened to him with bated breath, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her blue eyes filled with a love that increased and became more complete with each succeeding sentence. She knew that he was innocent of that black crime. She knew that he had been terribly wronged; but she also knew that he had already forgiven her for the share she innocently took in that wrong.

Jason Verner listened with a cold, sneering smile upon his thin visage. He was not convinced, because he did not wish to be. Guilt suited him better than innocence in this case.

"Very eloquent, and quite specious, I candidly admit," he deliberately observed, as Milo Tyrwhite ceased speaking. "But it is lamentably weak in one important respect. It is simply a denial, without one scintilla of proof. That woman presented her evidence when she made her charges; a baby that looked remarkably like you in its face and with its black eyes; a letter admitting the vile crime, each character of which was a perfect *fac-simile* of your handwriting."

"In the one instance, an imaginary resemblance, only too easily detected by one already seeking to condemn, proof or no proof, and which resemblance those suspicious eyes could have found in any child picked up at random, and ranging from snow-white to coal-black," steadily retorted Milo. "In the other, if not also a mistaken conception, a forgery!"

"With which you charge me, I am to infer?" coldly demanded Jason Verner, showing his teeth slightly.

"With which I charge no person, as yet," was the quick response. "I know that I never wrote a letter in all my life which could be so twisted even by my bitterest enemy. Knowing this as I do, I have no hesitation in nailing it as a forgery, foul and treacherous as the brain that first conceived it!"

"Just as you would even had your hand traced a score of the same sort," bowed Verner, grimly. "It is an empty assertion, unsupported even by an oath."

"But one which I swear to prove true as the charge is false, Mr. Verner. I simply ask the opportunity to prove my innocence by being confronted with my accusers, be they one or be they legion. This any man has a right to demand."

"Just as I have an equal right to decline having my name dragged into shameful publicity by another."

"If you are not ready to prove your charges, you have no right to make them. But I am not pressing the matter with you just at present, Mr. Verner. Confident in my innocence, and my ability to prove that innocence in the strictest court of the land, I can wait a few days or even months longer; unless—"

"Cedora, do you doubt me still?" he uttered, in a low, passionate tone, turning to the maiden, whose face was lighted up with a rare smile of perfect joy as she said:

"Milo, I do not doubt—I never doubted your truth and honor, in my real soul, though my pride made me try, oh! so hard and so persistently! I knew that the man who had won my first and only love could not be so utterly base! I knew it then—I know it now!"

And with a low, sobbing cry, she sprang to his arms, her face hidden on his breast, convulsive sobs shaking her frame; but they were born of pure joy and purer love.

Jason Verner sat gnawing his thumb-nail after his disagreeable fashion. His hard eyes glittered viciously as he saw how completely his child was won over by the man whom he now hated more bitterly than ever. But he dared not interfere by word or action. There was love, pure and ardent, in the dark eyes of Milo Tyrwhite; but there was also a danger signal too plain for such a crafty watcher to disregard just then.

For a few moments Milo Tyrwhite contented himself with silently scolding his betrothed. His hand tenderly swept over the golden-crowned head, while he held her firmly, protectingly to his breast. He stooped and pressed a kiss on her brow, then gently moved until she occupied the chair which had supported him, standing by her side, one hand still about her.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Verner?" he asked, with a trace of triumph in his tones which he could not entirely suppress.

Faint though it was, it was still enough to

drive the forced composure from the other, and with a grating snarl, Jason Verner cried:

"That my child is bewitched by one of the basest scions of a thoroughly evil stalk—yes! Curse you, Milo Tyrwhite! I'll be even with you yet, laugh as you may now! I'll forget what has thus far held me back—I'll throw shame to the winds, and show you up as you are, a black-hearted betrayer of innocence, even though I have to drag my only living child to the stand to bear witness against you!"

"It will be no shame to help clear him from even the faintest suspicion of wrong-doing!" cried Cedora, her blue eyes flashing. "I will go without one fear—unless—may Heaven forgive me if I wrong you by the terrible doubt, father!—the fear that the crime will be placed nearer home!"

She shuddered, covering her face with her hands, as though she feared to read the truth of her dark suspicions were she to gaze into her father's face. And, truly, had she done so—had she watched him as closely as Milo Tyrwhite watched—her suspicions would have become almost certainty.

If ever evil plotter was self-convicted of crime then Jason Verner was proven guilty by his own face. And he felt that this was so. He felt that Milo Tyrwhite no longer doubted whose agency had been uppermost in separating him from the maiden whom he loved so passionately. And feeling this, his insane hatred carried him away, and he heaped curses on the very name of Tyrwhite.

"I always hated them," he added, his first savage paroxysm exhausted, but his malignance remaining in voice and words. "I always hated them, but I believe I hated you the worst of the entire lot, for you robbed me of my only treasure—the love of my only living child! I swore to be even with you then, and I repeat that vow now! You come of a race of vipers, all poison and treachery! There was but one decent one in the entire race, and she is dead—my wife!"

"Yet you take the trouble to journey so many miles at the bidding of one of that evil race," laughed Milo, his voice hard, his temper stirred to boiling by the savage onslaught made upon his dead relatives by one whom he now knew was a perjurer, if not a forger.

"And you follow me to spy upon my movements!"

"Not so, Mr. Verner," and as he spoke Milo grew calm and composed again. "I came here in obedience to the same person who summoned you. Here is the proof of my words."

He drew a letter from his pocket and unfolded it. He glanced rapidly over its contents, then stepped forward and suffered the paper to drop into the lap of the other. He stepped back once more, resuming his position beside Cedora.

Jason Verner made an impulsive movement as though he would brush the paper to the floor, but as his thin fingers touched it, they hesitated, his features working with mingled anger and curiosity. The latter emotion proved the most powerful, and partially averting his face from the steady gaze of Milo Tyrwhite, he took up the letter and read its contents.

It was written in the same clear, bold characters which marked the letter we saw him read earlier that same night, and he saw, even before he read a single word, that Milo Tyrwhite had not attempted to deceive him.

"SMALL HOPES, COL., June 4, '79.

"MILO, SON OF JAMES TYRWHITE:—

"My Boy:—Have you entirely forgotten that this world contains a certain worthless, thoughtless, graceless scamp whose birth gives him the right to call you brother? Have you forgotten that there once lived under the same roof with you an elder brother, little though he may have deserved the loving title—for he used to be viciously jealous of the bright little lad who received a double portion of kind words and fatherly love!"

"That brother now appeals to you by the claims of blood, to come to him in his far Western home, to share in the prosperity which has befallen him. He has enough for a score, if quiet enjoyment alone be taken as the scale of measurement; enough as he now looks at it to restore the name of Tyrwhite to even more than its proud eminence in the past.

"If the name is ever restored and the family ever built up, as I pray it may, the most of the work must devolve on you. I am not superstitious, in the ordinary acceptance of the term, but I believe that my life-line is nearly paid out. I feel that I will never live to behold the fulfillment of my pet dream; but you are young, and may live to see the day!"

"I learn through careful and thorough investigation, that besides you, my blood flows only in the veins of one other—Cedora Verner—and, through his marriage, her father. I have addressed him a letter to the same effect as I now address you. I ask him to come to Small Hopes, without any unnecessary delay, bringing his daughter with him. If both letters are answered as I hope they will be, and you should meet on the road, I request you as I have him, to politely ignore his presence on the way, as well as after your arrival at Small Hopes. I have my reasons for this wish, and much may depend on its being faithfully complied with.

"If you decline to come, forget that I ever wrote this; forget that you ever had a brother; just as I shall forget that James Tyrwhite ever had another son than,

"ALBUS TYRWHITE."

Like the other, a strange, incomprehensible letter, promising so much, yet saying so little when it was carefully analyzed! So reflected

Jason Verner as he finished reading the closely written lines.

"You see now why I am here, Mr. Verner," said Milo Tyrwhite, coldly speaking as the other refolded the letter. "From what is written there, I infer that you are here on the same errand, in answer to the same summons?"

"It's a vile plot between you and him to excite my hopes only to dash them to ruin, while you laugh me to scorn!" grated the miser, the lust for gold leaping into his eyes just as it had when he showed Cedora that enigmatical letter addressed to himself.

"I never hoped to share his gold," was the swift reply. "I can make my own way in this world. Only for the hope that something would happen to gain me the happiness which I have already found, I would have permitted you to come alone, content to be shut out of this fortune, that you might gain the more."

"Talk—all talk!"

"Not so, Mr. Verner, and here is the proof. Say that you will help me to clear away the vile lies which have been put upon my past—swear that when I am proved wholly innocent you will no longer oppose my union with Cedora—and I will give you in writing a full assignment of any wealth my brother may see fit to give me."

Cedora uncovered her face and gazed imploringly at her stern parent. He caught her gaze, and it seemed to produce the very opposite effect to that she hoped and longed for.

He flung the crumpled letter into the young man's face, springing to his feet with clinched and uplifted right hand, his face fairly convulsed, his voice harsh and strained.

"Never! ten thousand times never! I forbid her even speaking to you! If she dares to wed you, spawn of a treacherous hypocrite! she does it under the weight of a father's bitter, blackest curse! Sooner than see her mate with you, or any one bearing your name, I would millions of times rather place her in her grave!"

"Father—have mercy!" gasped the poor girl, sobbing.

"Sooner than touch one penny that came from your hands, Milo Tyrwhite, I would live in a poorhouse and go to fill a pauper grave! My heaviest curse on you and your name forever!"

He ceased abruptly, turning his face toward the door. A sharp, decided rapping sounded on the outer side.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER CLAIMS THE PROUD TITLE.

So wholly unexpected was the charge made by Bill Jones, that even when he pointed direct at Old Tom Moore, not one of his auditors fairly comprehended who he meant, until the Relic shot out—first that indignant denial, and then himself by way of the open space left by Stormy Steve on his first appearance in the Bower that eventful evening.

It was a neat performance, accomplished with extraordinary agility and ease for one so time and whisky worn as the wandering memento of golden days had appeared on the surface, and before one present could lift a finger or move a foot toward preventing his flight, he had vanished from sight.

"It's him! I swear it!" cried the kidnapper, savagely.

He had time to say no more. Stormy Steve grasped him and shoved him into the willing hands of Ullman, crying:

"Billy, take him until I come back. And you, gentlemen—I'll show you the door!"

He leaped crouching half-way to the locked door, then leaped up and kicked out with his feet, thus adding double impetus to his weight. With a splintering crash the door was beaten outward, and as his magnificent figure followed it, the night air was split with the sonorous peal:

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!"

The only difficulty about the number of his followers, was in their ability to clear the partially-obstructed doorway. One and all were eager to follow the lead of such a wonderful champion as the mad athlete had that night proven himself; but all the same, their ears were readily strained to catch the words which followed that peculiar slogan:

"Divide and scatter, pards! Five hundred dollars from my own pocket to the man or men who catch and bring him back to the Bower, alive and unharmed—not a red cent for him dead!"

By the time the last word had passed his lips, Stormy Steve was at the corner of the saloon, glancing sharply down the sort of alley in which had taken place that remarkable exhibition, but a brief time before; but he could see nothing of the fugitive in that direction. Here and there lay deep lines and blotches of shades sufficient to cover even a moving figure; but along the main street the same thing might be noted.

"Divide and spread out, mates!" he cried, sharply. "Take him if you find him, but not to hurt. If he shows fight, keep him in sight while you make a row sufficient to guide others to the spot. Divide—a few this way, with me, the rest right on down the street, to split up and explore every turn and possible avenue of flight!"

Remember! alive and unhurt, or not a red cent for your trouble!"

And then the quest for the Relic of '49 swept on and widened like the rays of a fan, not only in the direction taken by Stormy Steve, but directly opposite, until the many rays formed an irregular but complete circle.

It seemed an impossibility for a human being to escape so many keen and eager eyes, but minute after minute passed by without bringing the exultant yell of discovery. At first the most prominent fear that racked the excited brain of nearly every searcher, was that each coming moment would bring with it the yell that proved another the lucky hunter; but as the time went on and the search fairly passed beyond the utmost confines of Small Hopes, this fear changed its complexion materially. Now the fear was that the signal would be uttered by no man.

And so it proved. The search was a complete failure. Old Tom Moore, or "Private John Smith," as the kidnapper denounced him, had vanished as utterly as would have been the case had the earth opened and swallowed him up without a single witness to tell the marvelous tale.

Reluctantly Stormy Steve gave over the search. He had his own reasons for securing the Relic, now that he was charged with being the outlaw who, of recent days, had been making himself disagreeably "numerous" in that section. He particularly wished to place the Relic, real or pretended, face to face with the kidnapper, now that charge had been made. But he also knew when to drop a hopeless project, and when that time came, he returned to Billy's Bower.

Naturally enough, when at a loss just what course to pursue, one by one the searchers had gravitated toward the one whom they recognized as a leader, and by the time he reached the Bower, Stormy Steve had quite a respectable following, so far as numbers went, at least.

He entered over the ruined door, his face showing hard and stern. That wild, half-insane light had fled from his big blue eyes, but in them was an expression of fixed resolve that seemed to Bill Jones no whit less dangerous.

Billy Ullman had proved himself a faithful custodian, and one who preferred to take no chances. He had, through his assistant, Johnny, placed the rope around the kidnapper's neck. Johnny held the slack, ready to tighten the strain at a signal from his superior, who was leaning across the counter, a cocked revolver in his right hand covering the prisoner, another in his left hand commanding the entrance to the Bower.

"Here's your doughnut, pard, without even a crumb of sugar brushed off him," he cried, cheerily, as the mad athlete entered the Bower. "Hope you've brought his mate, so we can trot them as a match-team across the divide!"

Stormy Steve vouchsafed no answer to the remark, but paused in front of the kidnapper, gazing into his face with a burning intentness that seemed to read him through and through.

The prisoner fidgeted a trifle before he answered that magnetic power, but at length his blood-shot eyes were lifted until they met those blazing blue orbs. One breath—an age, it seemed to the quivering wretch!—and then a hard, savage laugh parted the lips of the mad athlete.

"You pitiful cur! You base counterfeit in the shape of humanity! You haven't the sand even to tell a lie and stick to it! Now—what did you hope to gain by falsely charging that broken-down bum with being Private John Smith?"

"He is—I'll take my oath!" muttered Bill Jones, his eyes drooping after a vain attempt to meet those of his stern and contemptuous accuser.

"And swear to a lie when you say it," coldly retorted Stormy Steve, his mustaches curling. "You pitched on that miserable devil as the one present least likely to have friends to back him. You thought that if you could give a sop to Judge Lynch, he might be content to loosen his grip on your throat—but your lie is a boomerang that threatens to send you over the range by the tight-rope line!"

"You swore you'd give me life and liberty if I brought you face to face with the man who hired me!" desperately exclaimed the kidnapper. "I've done my part. You want to crawl out of yours. I might have known it—I *did* know it! But—curse him for tripping me up when he might easily have aided me to get clear! If I could see him stretched first, I'd laugh in your faces, all of you!"

Bill Jones was terribly in earnest just then. Whether it was because he knew the Relic was Private John Smith in cunning disguise, and so a double traitor to him in his distress, or whether his ire was solely due to the fact that Old Tom Moore had overthrown him just as his escape during the confusion seemed assured, certain it was that for the moment his thirst for revenge was greater even than his love for life.

The crowd saw this, and from their faces it was plain to be seen they believed his charge against the wandering bum, but Stormy Steve seemed of the opposite opinion.

"What I swore, I will do, when you have kept

your part of the compact; but you lied when you pointed out that poor devil as your employer. Whatever else he may be, he is not the road-agent, nor the man who employed you to commit this vile outrage."

"What made him take to his heels, then?" suddenly uttered the kidnapper, with a shy, vicious glance out of the corner of the eye nearest his judge.

The majority of those who heard him felt that this was a center-shot, but Stormy Steve laughed scornfully.

"What makes a country-reared dog take to his heels when a mob in town yells at him? The self-same fear that is making you stain your lips with a lie false as it is cruel!"

Stormy Steve stepped closer to the prisoner, tapping him lightly on the shoulder, his voice suddenly growing dangerously smooth and evenly modulated:

"William Jones, stealer of women, look at me with those innocent eyes of yours. Take your time. Brush the lies out of them first. I've heard enough of that sort of music from your tongue, without having it stare me in the eyes as well."

With an effort, the kidnapper obeyed, so far as looking into these blue orbs went. He could not refuse. There was a strange magnetism in those blazing eyes that defied his resistance. And though he felt as though the truth was being drawn out from his secret soul, his gaze remained fixed as though held by the fabled basilisk!

"You still swear that the road-agent and general rascal-at-large who calls himself Private John Smith, hired you and your pard to watch and steal away this lady?"

"That's what he called himself, whether he lied or not."

"And you recognized your employer in that man you pointed out a few minutes ago?" sharply demanded Stormy Steve.

Cold drops of perspiration were standing on the brow of the wretch. Great veins marked their course over his temples. He shivered from head to foot like a man suddenly afflicted with the ague. Twice his lips parted as though to speak, then closed so sharply that his teeth clicked together with a violence that made the sounds distinctly audible through the room.

Stormy Steve bent his face a little nearer that of his prisoner, his blue eyes fairly blazing. Then, like the explosion of a torpedo, came the one word:

"Yes!"

His inquisitor turned away from him with a short, hard laugh, worse than contempt, ringing in his every tone:

"Pah! you miserable cur! You need another touch of my patient persuader before you can even begin to recognize the truth when you stray in its vicinity! If I had the time to waste—but I haven't! Billy," turning to Ullman, "have you anything in the shape of an outside wrap that will serve to cover my summer garb, even in part?"

Even as he uttered the words, his roving eyes noticed a light waterproof hanging behind the bar at the rear end, and with a light leap he crossed the bar and secured it, spreading it over his broad shoulders as he bounded back again.

"This will serve, I reckon. Look after that sweet pill, Billy, and keep him where he won't spoil. You understand?"

Their eyes met as he uttered the words, and the proprietor of the Bower nodded assent. Did he understand? At least he thought he did.

Without another word, without a glance at the man about whose neck the noose still depended, Stormy Steve passed out of the saloon and vanished from sight.

Of all save Billy Ullman. He glided lightly to the door and stepped outside. The moon gave light sufficient for him to trace the black-draped figure until it reached the front door of the Sanctuary. He saw it enter, and then turned himself and re-entered the saloon.

He found the sports whispering together, casting dark and meaning looks upon Bill Jones, whom Johnny still held in subjection, the rope now stretched so tight that the kidnapper was forced to stand painfully erect against the bar to avoid suffocation. Resist he dared not, with those dark and threatening faces before him.

His own face was as pale as mingled dirt and blood would admit. His eyes were wild and full of fear—such fear as a cornered wild beast may exhibit when he finds himself unable to strike with claw or bite with teeth.

Billy caught his wild, half-appealing glance, but directly avoided it, his own face pale and hard-set. Right or wrong, he believed he had read a death doom in the eyes of Stormy Steve.

"What's the word, Billy?" demanded one of the sports.

Like magic the hard lines vanished, and gave place to the pleasant smile which had long since won for him the prefix of "Genial." And his voice was soft and smooth as silk as he cried out while passing behind the bar:

"That it's a monstrous long time between drinks! What'll you take, gentlemen? This is Stormy Steve's treat, you know!"

He bent his head and hastily whispered a few words to his assistant, relieving him of the rope at the same time.

The crowd ranged alongside the bar, for the moment seeming to forget the very existence of Bill Jones. That worthy made an instinctive move toward the door, only to feel that a master-hand still held the rope. He knew that he could not loosen and cast off the tight noose, in time to escape.

It did not take practiced hands long to dispose of a single drink, and the sport who apparently stood in the light of spokesman for his fellows, as well as himself, repeated:

"What is the word, now, Billy?"

His meaning was clear enough not to require elaborate speech, and Billy Ullman did not affect to misunderstand him a second time.

"No go, Dicky, lad! The pill was placed under my wing, and I was bidden keep him where he wouldn't spoil. I hate to be a snag in the way when the boys wants to enjoy themselves, but you can see how I am situated. If you try to snatch Bill Jones off, I've got to shoot—unless some one is smart enough to catch me off my guard and jump on my back when I don't look for them!"

Johnny, in bustling about, helping the thirsty sports, managed to drop a few words into the ears of those who stood nearest the end of the bar where admittance was obtained behind it, and then slipped past his boss once more. With a clumsiness astonishing in one of his thorough training, he dropped a decanter from his hands, and at the loud crash, Billy Ullman turned toward him, dropping the rope. And then strong arms caught the proprietor of the Bower from behind, and he was carried outside, kicking and writhing, crying hoarsely:

"Don't tie me, boys! I'll be the mortal death o' some o' ye if you dare to tie me so I can't fight for my charge!"

It was an unfortunate suggestion, for it was immediately acted upon, and in less than two minutes Billy Ullman lay with his hands and feet tied securely.

"Don't take the pill away, I beg of you!" Billy gasped, as he struggled to free his hands. "If you run him down to the lower end and string him up, I'll haunt the last mother's son of you—I will, for a solemn fact!"

Other sturdy hands had grasped the luckless kidnapper, and held him beyond the possibility of escape. He struggled against them until his strength was gone. He raved like a maniac until some one choked his tongue to silence and until his jaws opened widely. Then a rude gag was inserted into the cavity, and despite the continued protestations of Billy, the mob dragged their victim out of the Bower into the night.

Johnny lay with his head just far enough beyond the end of the bar for his face to be seen by his master, apparently dead or stunned. If Billy doubted, he was reassured as soon as the mob cleared the room, for Johnny opened his eyes to their fullest extent, giving a doleful groan as he gasped:

"Ef my cabeza wasn't of the toughest, there wouldn't be enough of it left for one finger to scratch!"

"They downed you then, Johnny?" dolefully muttered Billy.

"Hit me with a whisky-bar'l, I do believe, boss!"

"And jumped me from behind when I wasn't looking! Johnny, it's mortal hard luck, isn't it? Lost the man Stormy put under my care. Thrown and tied like a bull-calf for the branding-iron! And can't even take in the necktie social, either!"

"Mebbe I could manage to crawl nigh enough to cut ye loose, boss! I've got a knife—ugh! ouch!"

"Johnny, think the boys have got so far ahead that we can't catch 'em in time to shoot for the lame duck?"

"I'm too badly crippled to fight a mite, boss!"

"And I'm afraid they tied me up so tight that my blood won't get to circulating free enough to pick trigger before Bill Jones crosses the divide on an air line! Hard luck, Johnny—monstrous hard luck!"

"It jest is, boss—the hardest luck I've struck since I came to Small Hopes!"

With extraordinary exertions Johnny managed to drag himself to the side of his employer, and then severed the ropes that bound his hands and feet. Billy leaped up with marvelous alacrity for one with badly impeded circulation. Possibly the wild, distant roar of human voices coming in through the open doorway helped spur him to activity.

"Clean out the till, Johnny!" he hurriedly muttered, as he took possession of the money-belt and wealth placed in his charge by Stormy Steve. "I don't reckon any sneak-thieves'll come this way while we're out prospecting."

"Hardly—with what's going on down yonder!" and Johnny nodded in the direction from whence those fierce, ominous yells and shouts proceeded.

"I don't believe my legs'll carry me quite close enough to the tree for nice shooting, Johnny," muttered Billy as he left the Bower and took to the street.

"And my head buzzes so almighty fast that if I had to blow my nose, I couldn't ketch it with-

out a lasso!" declared his able assistant. "I couldn't fight one side of a sardine!"

"Bad used up we were, both of us, Johnny. You can swear to that, can't you, when Stormy comes back to ask where we've put his little Sweet William?"

"I can take my 'davy they didn't give you a ghost of a show, boss, but yanked you from behind when you wasn't looking. And I know you must be awful cramped from them ropes!"

"And I know you'll have to wear a washtub in the morning, Johnny, or else go without a hat! Any man with less grit would be sick in bed, with a dozen doctors wrestling over him with grim death! But, Johnny, you didn't see who grabbed me, plain enough to swear to any one of them, did you?"

"Not a single swear, boss! I jest had time to see that you was grabbed, and then the hull house hit me on the cabeza!"

"That's mighty rough, Johnny—monstrous rough! For now I won't know who to tackle to get even—for it wouldn't look nice or white to bounce the whole crowd for what only a part of them did, now would it, Johnny?"

"Never do, boss—never do in this world!" was the sober response of his assistant.

This truly unique conversation was ended abruptly, for by this time they were near enough the scraggy tree which stood at the lower extremity of the town, and their eyes were too busy taking in the wild, impressive scene for their tongues to do much work.

The red glow of a hastily kindled bonfire aided the clear, moonlight night to make the surroundings plainly visible, and there, beneath the broken arm which the huge but battered tree thrust out at right-angles with its trunk, stood Bill Jones the noose fitted about his neck and drawn so taut that he stood almost on tiptoe to prolong his breath as far as the fiercely-yelling mob about him would permit.

The wild yells came in sudden bursts, with brief intervals between them, which were occupied apparently by some oratorical sport. The distance was a little too great for the sorely-crippled Billy and Johnny to satisfactorily catch the remarks made, and they were gingerly moving closer, when—

A last, furious outburst came from the mob, and the two eager watchers saw the body of Bill Jones drawn high up into the air, his unbound feet convulsively working, his body turning slowly around, as his weight slightly untwisted the strands.

"We couldn't get there in time, Johnny, hard as we struggled, could we?" muttered Billy, his gaze riveted upon the dangling, swinging figure of the kidnapper.

Johnny made no reply, for before he could utter a word, a wild, shrill chorus came from a greater distance than the scene of the lynching—and the next instant a single horseman shot into the brilliant firelight, scattering the dumfounded mob like chaff before the wind. He swept directly past the swaying figure—there came a bright flashing of steel—the kidnapper dropped across the thighs of his bold rescuer, who wrenched his horse half-way around and then plunged through the thunderstruck sports, with a wild, ringing laugh.

And the instant he did so a line of fire lighted up the gloom beyond the circle of fire-glow—a crashing report of firearms smote upon the ears of the demoralized mob. Not on all—some went down in death that was far too sudden for their senses to catch the report that heralded their death!

"Pour it into the galeots, my gallant Awkward Squad!" a shrill, piercing voice rung out, and a stream of red fire came from the same direction. "Show them that you're no slouches, even if you can't learn the regulation drill and step! Send them your cards—and write on each one that Stormy Steve is a liar right from headwaters! For I'm the Worst Pill in the Box! Tell him I said so—I, Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad!"

One more volley—then swiftly retreating hoof-strokes!

CHAPTER XI.

STORMY STEVE IN A NEW VEIN.

MILO TYRWHITE stood nearest the door, and after a barely perceptible hesitation, he advanced and opened it a few inches, intending to send the untimely caller away without admission. But in this he counted without his host, for a powerful hand pushed the door open wide before he could summon his strength to resist, and with no further ceremony Stormy Steve entered the room, his circus rig only partially disguised by the black waterproof which rested over his broad shoulders.

"Your servant, fair lady—and yours to command, gentlemen!" he muttered in deep, mellow tones, bowing first to Cedora and then to the other occupants of the room.

It was a somewhat difficult situation, when all things are taken into consideration. Any intrusion would have been bad enough, but while an ordinary person might be turned out of the room with little or no ceremony, such a course could hardly be followed with Stormy Steve, even had the mad athlete quietly submitted to the necessary degree of rudeness or main force.

The conspicuous part he had played in the rescue of Cedora Verner from the evil grasp of the kidnappers, prohibited even the thought of such a course.

Jason Verner, almost suffocating with his insane passions, dropped back into his seat, purple in the face, gasping, his thin nostrils quivering rapidly.

Cedora Verner, woman-like, averted her face while she hurriedly essayed to remove all traces of tears.

Milo Tyrwhite stood irresolute, not knowing just what to say or do; consequently he said and did nothing at first.

But Stormy Steve did not appear at all abashed or embarrassed by this peculiar reception, and recovering his perpendicular after that elaborate bow to the young lady, he gazed placidly from one to another.

He had paused long enough in the office without to remove all stains and blood-marks from his face, though there remained visible the clean cut made by Milo Tyrwhite's hard knuckles, the shallow gash across one cheek which marked the course of Bill Jones's pistol-shot. This was closed and covered over with a strip of court-plaster, though it could not be entirely hidden. Besides, there was a purplish welt among the silken curls which clustered near his right ear, where the shot the kidnapper fired when he struggled free from the overthrown horse had glanced.

With a careless grace, either natural or adroitly disguised, Stormy Steve's right arm hung free of the cloak, it being draped from his left shoulder, and held closed before him with his sinister hand.

"If I'm intruding, my good friends, don't hesitate to say as much," he added, his voice smooth and even, his great blue eyes gazing placidly from one to another. "If there's one thing I hate worse than another, it is a fellow who seems incapable of taking a hint without the aid of good, stout shoe-leather properly applied! When I see that I am one too numerous for comfort, I just pick up my feet and hunt some other locality the very minute I finish the business in hand!"

His roving gaze reached the face of Milo Tyrwhite again as he uttered the concluding words, and despite himself, that young gentleman could not entirely refrain from smiling at the idea thus conveyed; few bores could ask any greater boon.

Jason Verner scowled all the more blackly as he saw that smile, for his suspicious nature instantly converted it into an assurance that these two men were leagued together against him and his interests.

Cedora Verner, woman-like again, was the first to act with anything like decision. She forgot her tear-marked cheeks, her inflamed lids, remembering only that this man had risked his life to rescue her from evil hands. She sprung from her seat and glided toward him, both hands extended, her voice, face, eyes, words, all telling how sincere she was.

"You, an intruder? Never that, after your gallant actions when those evil brutes had me so wholly in their power! Only for you—I shudder when I think what might have been my fate in such brutal, merciless hands! If I could only thank you as I wish! If my lips could only syllable the great flood of gratitude that fills my heart to overflowing! If I—"

Stormy Steve had taken both her little hands in his own, beaming genially down upon her as she brokenly uttered her thanks. She impulsively bent her head as though she would press her red lips to the hands that saved her, but the mad athlete deftly foiled her purpose, swiftly but gently bringing her hands up to meet his own lips instead.

"That looks better and more natural, lady," he said, with a low, musical laugh, his blue eyes dancing merrily. "And had my knightly exploits in your behalf been a thousandfold as tremendous as you are so generously rating them, this would far outweigh them all, leaving me your debtor for life!"

Jasper Verner seemed fairly swelling up with accumulating venom, and now a sharp, suspicious sniff made his thin nostrils quiver, as he rose to his feet and confronted Stormy Steve.

"I never permit myself to remain any man's debtor," he said, stiffly, pretending to misunderstand the closing sentence. "You wish pay for the service you were enabled to render my daughter. Please state the amount of your expectations, and I will at once cancel the obligation."

"Father! for shame!" impulsively cried Cedora, flushing crimson at the hard, almost brutal speech.

But Stormy Steve only laughed, in no wise hurt or put out of countenance by the ungracious reception.

"You must wait until Stormy Steve gets untangled from Stephen Hasbrook, my dear sir," he said, with a low bow. "Just at present, you see before you a mixture of half-and-half, one portion of which has not heard your truly magnificent offer, while the other prefers not to understand its purport."

"Are you crazy?" stammered Jason Verner, staring at the speaker, puzzled and perplexed—possibly that was just what the mad athlete calculated upon!

"That's a mere matter of opinion, on which even two such perfect gentlemen as you and me, Mr. Verner, might entertain exactly opposite belief; so, supposing we pass it by in wise silence?"

Jason Verner frowned, his teeth clicking sharply.

"I never jest, even in supposition, sir. You have thrust a favor upon me, through assisting my child to escape from those evil wretches. I offer to pay you all—ay! double what you may consider such service worth! I hate to receive favors!"

"And it just makes me boil up and bubble over with pure delight to confer them!" declared Stormy Steve, placidly. "As for your magnificent offer, I am in no immediate danger of starving, though you may think my circumstances rather straitened, if you judge from the scantiness of my wardrobe! I have all the ducats I can find any present use for, and the future can care for itself."

"You don't like my style—which is but another illustration of the well-known fact that great minds are apt to run in the same channel; for I can cheerfully say *ditto*!"

"You hate to receive a favor, unless you can immediately cover it over with a mask of gold. On the contrary, it just tickles me to death when I can sow favors broadcast over such sour soil! And if I were starving to death for a single crumb of bread, and you were to offer me an entire bakery with its contents, I'd shake my classic head and murmur *nixey*!"

"But I won't have it, I say!" spluttered Jason Verner, in helpless obstinacy, fairly overwhelmed by that avalanche of words, uttered so suavely, but underneath which lay a sting to the full as sharp and irritating as that ever carried by the hottest-tempered hornet.

"But you can't help yourself, my dear sir," laughed the strange character, genially beaming upon him with those great blue eyes. "I not only decline to take back the favor which you declare does not fit you, but I've come here to bestow another, will-you, won't-you?"

Jason Verner sunk back into his chair, literally overwhelmed. This was a terrible fellow! He did not know what to make of him, or how to encounter that impudence which was at once so complete, so colossal, so insolent yet suave!

Stormy Steve seemed content with his complete victory at that style of fencing, and his face and voice both grew grave and earnest as he spoke again:

"I returned your insult with idle chaff, Mr. Verner, as the least troublesome method of disposing of it. Now, let me inform you just why and for what I have intruded upon you."

"The rascals who attempted to abduct your daughter, were not acting wholly for themselves. By a little persuasion of a certain description, the one captured, Bill Jones, as he gave his name, has been induced to make full confession."

"He says that he and his partner were hired by the rascal who calls himself Private John Smith, chief of the Awkward Squad, an organized band of road-agents and stage-robbers. He swears that this villain pointed out you and your daughter to them, at some point along the stage route, bidding them follow you to Small Hopes and watch your every movement. He bade them, if the opportunity should offer, carry off Miss Verner. They were to take her to some remote recess among the hills, and there hold her captive until he came to relieve them of their charge."

"The scoundrel!" impulsively broke in Milo Tyrwhite, his hands clinching, his black eyes aglow with indignation.

"I see you know the fellow," half-laughed Stormy Steve, with a short nod. "He is a scoundrel, and all the more dangerous from his pretended disgust for those of his profession who put on style with their exalted titles of military or other rank. He declares that he is a matter-of-fact robber and thief, and selects a title to correspond."

"But I—I never harmed him!" muttered Verner, helplessly, startled by this unexpected turn of affairs.

"You are supposed to be rich, no doubt, and the business-like private in the ranks of gold-gatherers has an eye on your money-bags, of course," was the prompt response. "It is an old trick, but one that often pays better than robbing stage-coaches. Beyond a doubt he intended to secure Miss Verner, and then bleed you for the heaviest amount he could extort from your paternal love and fears. He came within an ace of succeeding in his first attempt, and you may rest assured he will make another and still another, as long as you remain where he can reach you or your daughter."

"Not while I have an arm to protect her!" muttered Milo.

"You would not be the first man he has elected for a high lot," swiftly retorted Stormy Steve, but with a glance of hearty appreciation toward the spirited young man. "There's only one way in which you can surely foil his evil plots, Mr. Verner. Don't waste a single minute in settling up your affairs in Small Hopes. Indeed, unless they are of great importance, you would show wisdom, as well as save money, by

throwing them over at once and pulling out for a more congenial climate by the very first stage!"

It was an unlucky speech, if Stormy Steve hoped to win Jason Verner to precipitate flight, for it awakened his suspicions afresh. What if this free-spoken fellow was really an ally engaged by Milo Tyrwhite, to drive him from Small Hopes before the coming of Albus Tyrwhite? What if it was all a cunning plot to cheat him out of the promised fortune?

The suspicion stung him to madness, and he leaped from his seat with convulsed features, his voice harsh and full of vicious hatred as he snarled:

"It's all a vile plot! You want to drive me out of Small Hopes, that *he*—the lowest and worst of an accursed race!—may cheat me out of my share in the fortune which is pledged me for coming! I know it! And you, you insolent hound! you wandering mountebank! are aiding him in his shameless plot!"

Cedora Verner sprung to his side, and tried to check the savage flood which burst from his quivering lips. She was pale as death, her fair face marked with deepest shame and mortification.

"Father, for my sake, if not for your own. You forget yourself—forget how nobly those whom you are so shamefully reviling, have acted in my behalf! I beg of you—"

"And what you beg for, you're going to have, as long as Stephen Hasbrook stands to the fore, my child!" cried the mad athlete as he strode forward and with a single effort forced the half-crazed miser back into his chair.

Helpless as a child in that strong grasp, Jason Verner seemed to wilt, his tongue growing still, his fury vanishing. Stormy Steve gently turned Cedora over to the care of her lover, who took the most approved method of soothing her, seeing that Steve had his back turned and Jason Verner was in no fit condition for taking notes or raising an objection.

Stormy Steve shook one finger before the staring eyes of the subdued miser, saying sternly:

"Of all the fools, an old fool is the worst—and I must confess that you can put your mark a little notch higher up on the scale than any fool I ever met before this night! But, mind you, there's a limit even in this. You've gone far enough. You have no right to risk the life or liberty of your child, whatever you may do with your own, and for her sake, I repeat my warning. Go away from Small Hopes. Go back to the place you came from, where fools are so plenty that no attention is paid to the coming of another, even though he be a gilded one."

"If you stop here, Private John Smith will strike again, and strike harder, too! Not at your worthless life—for if that was his aim, it would not be worth a warning from any man's lips. Or if it was solely at your gold—if he could cut your purse without using the lady as a tool—you might go your own way, for all of Stormy Steve or Stephen Hasbrook!"

"But he'll try to steal *her* away, just as he tried to do it to-night with Bill Jones and his mate. He'll succeed, too, unless you give him the slip before he can spit on his hands and square himself for another round. He'll take her where no man can rescue her, save through bleeding more gold than any honest person of my acquaintance can give. You—miser at heart as your eyes and face proclaim you!—would whine and beg and dilly-dally along until he lost patience and harm came to *her*!"

"It's all a vile plot!" gurgled Jason Verner, faintly.

"Bah!" and the great blue eyes blazed fiercely. "I'll fetch Bill Jones to see you, and if his story doesn't satisfy you, then we'll use—"

He paused abruptly, bending one ear. The faint, far-away yelling of the mob who had dragged Bill Jones from the Bower to meet his death by the rope, came to his ears through the closed doors. This was not the first wild outburst, but in his earnest excitement the mad athlete had not noticed the others.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, sharply. "The boys are up to mischief with Bill Jones! Only for this obstinate pill, I wouldn't care a fig, but now—young man, will you take a walk with me?"

"To the foot of the gallows, if you ask it?" was the impulsive response, as Milo gently removed the clinging arms which were wound about him.

"That's just where our little promenade will lead us, or I'm widely mistaken in those sounds!" grimly observed Stormy Steve, casting the water-proof from him. "The sports are about making Bill Jones dance again on—"

The air was rent by a rattling crash, and Stormy Steve gained the door by a single bound, snarling:

"It's worse than that! Come on, young fellow!"

Milo only paused to press a hasty kiss upon the brow of his nearly-fainting betrothed, then he hurried from the house and sped after Stormy Steve, who was far down the street, running like a race-horse toward the fire-lighted scene of bloodshed and confusion.

He found the mad athlete striving to rally the utterly-demoralized sports. He had succeeded in checking a few of the fugitives, and his swift, cutting reproofs were constantly adding to the number.

"For shame, you men of Small Hopes!" his stentorian voice rung out, clear and penetrating as a clarion. "Are you all cowards? Isn't there a single grain of sand in the whole pot-and-boiling of you? Running from nothing! Running from a retreating foe! Halt and rally! or I'll hunt up a dishclout and everlastingly blister the parts you turn toward the enemy! I will—and I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Not the most elegant address, perhaps, but it was an effectual one. Taken so completely by surprise, and lacking a recognized leader, the sports of Small Hopes were utterly demoralized before a single shot was fired. Then—with their fellows falling all about them—with the leaden hail pouring on them from unseen foemen—they thought only of safety in precipitate flight.

But it was different now. They had seen sufficient of Stormy Steve that night to feel confidence in the man. They would follow where he showed the way, and unflinchingly face double the force from which they were a minute before flying in utmost dismay.

"Where's Bill Jones?" sharply demanded Stormy Steve, with a glance at the severed rope lying beneath the tree.

"Gone—cut down and carried off by that devil!" hastily exclaimed one of the men who had turned from flight.

"Who did it? Sharp, my good fellow!"

"Private John Smith, he said he was, as he rode off!"

"How many were they?"

"The air was just full of them, boss!"

"Bah! how many can you swear to seeing, with your own eyes? Flat-footed, now; no counting in imagination, too!"

"Only one—but there were heap more out of sight. Look at the boys lying there, thrown cold! Count up the wounds in the crowd, Stormy, and see for yourself."

The speaker held up one of his own hands, shattered at the wrist by a bullet. It was bleeding freely, his voice was growing perceptibly weaker, yet with Stormy Steve in the position of leader, he was ready to go on until he dropped from the loss of blood.

"Possibly a dozen—hardly more, if it was really the Awkward Squad," said Stormy Steve, frowning, as he glanced rapidly around him. "We've got enough here to swallow him and his Awkward Squad without stopping to grease or sugar-coat the pill, bitter as it would taste in a decent man's mouth—and if they haven't got the heels of us, we'll do it, too!"

"Follow me, lads! I'll give a cool thousand to the man who can trail or sight those rascals to their hiding-place!"

There was a loud cheer at this liberal offer, and the men of Small Hopes dashed after the mad athlete who was shouting:

"I'm Stormy Steve, and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Foremost among those who followed the mad athlete out from the circle of firelight, was Milo Tyrwhite, resolute and determined, for the moment fired with hope of meeting and forever putting out of the way the man who was apparently threatening his loved one with evil.

And for a mile or more he raced on with the best, though to him it seemed all blind and aimless work as his excited brain grew cooler. There was no sound of the enemy. They had been swallowed up by the night, and the nature of the soil was such that even the trail of a horse could not be lifted with no more light than the moon afforded.

As this became a conviction, Milo Tyrwhite slackened his pace, just as many of the others were doing, and soon came to a halt. He gazed around him in search of Stormy Steve, and even called aloud on his name; but there came no answer.

"It's trouble worse than wasted, and I'll turn about," he muttered, in accents of disgust as he suited the action to his words. "When day comes, we'll see what can be done. Just now, we're playing the fool in fine style!"

He walked leisurely back toward town, his brain busying itself with the exciting events of that night, as connected with Cedora Verner. He felt as though he trod on air, despite his forebodings on her account. The black past had gone, never to return, he told himself. Poor fool! he little dreamed of all that lay before him!

In coming to Small Hopes, Milo Tyrwhite had strictly followed the instructions given him by his long-missing brother. He had not interchanged a single word with either Jason Verner or Cedora while en route, and before looking for a lodging-place, he had waited until they were settled in the Sanctuary.

Then, looking for a place where he might put up, the young man secured lodgings with a gaunt Yankee, who answered to the name of "Long Eph Bilson," who proudly declared that his "Caravan" could just knock the socks of

Deacon Patmore's Sanctuary, even if they didn't sling on quite so much style!

It was toward this dingy, dirty, unsavory lodging-place that Milo Tyrwhite now bent his steps. The house was situated at the opposite end of the town from the Sanctuary, and the front of it was cast into deep shadow by the change in the position of the moon. This was a significant fact, owing to what happened, but Milo Tyrwhite had not a thought of evil as he entered the gloom—to have a heavy blanket flung over his head, stifling his outcry—to be choked down by strong hands—then lifted up and borne swiftly away—whither?

CHAPTER XII.

FRESH TROUBLE FOR JASON VERNER.

It was late before Jason Verner got to bed that night, and well along in the small hours before slumber visited his eyes. It was late when he awoke, and later still before he made any effort to arise and clothe himself.

Not that Deacon Patmore furnished his guests with such sumptuous couches, for they were stern simplicity itself. But he had so much to think of that it was long before he could bring his mind back to everyday habits. Then, too, he was vaguely conscious of a strangely dull, heavy sensation about his brain. He knew that he was awake, but at the same time he felt dimly conscious that something was wrong—that his brain was incapable of performing its customary duties with anything like its wonted decision and clearness.

And when he did crawl out of bed, he gave a gasp of mingled pain and alarm, for his head swam so strangely, his heart palpitated with such difficulty that he feared the hand of death was placed upon him in terrible earnest.

But that sensation soon wore off, and he descended to the "parlor," where he expected to find Cedora awaiting his coming for breakfast. She was not there, and as he gazed around him in surprise, he noted the manner in which the sunlight came in through the dingy glass. He glanced at his watch, and saw that it was high noon!

"She's grown tired of waiting, and is out to dinner," he muttered, though he wondered at that, too, after what had happened the evening before.

He glanced into the hot, unsavory dining-room, but though it contained sundry persons plying knife and fork as though on a wager, a single glance assured him Cedora was not there.

"She's overslept herself, the same as I did," was his second supposition; but it proved to be equally wide of the mark.

He returned up-stairs, and after rapping impatiently at the door of his daughter's chamber, turned the knob and entered the room—only to start back with a short exclamation of growing wonder. Though the bed had been occupied, it was not now. And a second glance showed him that the garments Cedora had worn the evening before were also missing.

For a brief space he stood like one dumfounded, for he could not believe that Cedora would have again ventured to leave the hotel, even in broad daylight, alone and—

A harsh, inarticulate cry parted his lips as a terrible suspicion shot across his foggy brain, and turning, he almost stumbled headlong down the steep flight of steps in his anxiety to disprove that horrible doubt.

"Gray hairs ag'in' the world I al'ays *did* say, 'squire!" exclaimed Deacon Patmore, as he deftly caught the old man in his strong arms and thereby saved him a severe fall, if no worse. "But ef I was you—not meanin' to give my 'vice whar it ain't welcome, ye onderstan'—ef I was you, I raily do reckon I'd rather take a little mo' time an' not quite sech monstrous long resks, a-gittin' down-stairs!"

It was anything but politeness that suffered him to finish this long drawl, for the instant he found himself sufficiently recovered from the shock to utter a word, Jason Verner hoarsely gasped:

"My daughter—where is she? When did she come down from her room? Curse it, man, can't you speak out?"

"Cl'ar an' loud as the best who wasn't born, bred an' raised a auctioneer," stiffly responded the deacon, his huge bulk unshaken by the thin hands that clutched at his shoulder and strove to quicken his utterance by main force.

"She's gone, I tell you, fool!" gasped Verner, fairly beside himself, his maddening suspicions by this time become a certainty. "She's stolen away—she's—oh, my child!"

He clasped his trembling hands about his throbbing temples, staggering back until caught by the partition wall. In those few moments, while Deacon Patmore stared at him in mute amazement, Jason Verner suffered more than death.

A bustle in the dining-room told Deacon Patmore that something of that cry had been heard, and without stopping to ask permission or pardon, he picked the old man up in his arms and hurried with him into the parlor. He thrust his big bald head past the jamb, and bluntly called out to the other heads which protruded from the dining-room:

"Nothin' out o' the way, gents; jest a wee tetch o' the crawlers, an' no harm done!"

He closed the door behind him, and apologetically muttered to Jason Verner:

"I didn't name no names, an' they won't never hit on you as the s'posed jim-jammer. I thought mebbe you'd rather tell the deacon jes' what's gone wrong, fu'st off, then to hev a hull slew o' them sharp-noses runnin' in on ye. Now, ef you'd jest bite off an inch or so o' this, squire, I raily reckon it'd do ye heap good, an' help mightily in limberin' up your tongue."

Though he kept a well-supplied bar in the house, Deacon Patmore was seldom caught without a flask in his hip-pocket, and now he coaxingly held its open nozzle to the pale lips of his guest. The offer was accepted, for Jason Verner felt that he needed strength for the duty before him. His whirling brain was beginning to clear, and he felt grateful to the deacon for his double thoughtfulness.

With a desperate effort he steadied his organs of speech and managed to articulate:

"You have not seen Miss Verner this morning?"

The deacon shook his head promptly in the negative.

"Yit that don't kiver the hull ground, squire. Thar's the private way o' gittin' outside, 'thout comin' in through the bar, ye know. It's a pritty day outside, an' as you was slow in turnin' out o' your bunk, mebbe the little lady tuck a notion to stroll 'round the town, like."

Jason Verner forced a faint smile. He knew that if Cedora had left the hotel of her own accord, it was with a far different purpose than that suggested by the deacon.

"There are other hotels in town, of course?"

"Lodgin'-houses, squire," and Deacon Patmore drew his huge frame rigidly erect. "They's them, but only one hotel."

"Which is the best—after this, of course?" Jason Verner hurriedly added, fairly burning up with impatience, but now fully alive to the wisdom of keeping his terrible suspicions covered over until they were forever decided one way or the other. "Where would a young man of means, say—"

"The gent as was with you last night?" interposed Deacon Patmore, with a readiness of both speech and comprehension that was remarkable in him. "He hung up at the Caravan, kep' by Long Eph, up the other eend o' town, which—Go it, boots!"

Jason Verner was out of the room and making for the outer air before the deacon could finish his elaborate directions, and with a slow shrug of lofty disgust, the huge host moved off to his bar.

There was but the one broad street in Small Hopes, so one could hardly go astray, even though so terribly worked up as Jason Verner was at that moment, and he had not covered a hundred yards before he caught sight of the sign of the Caravan.

A tall, long-legged, long-bodied, long-faced individual was lounging in the open door, and to him Jason Verner spoke, by a remarkable effort of will making his voice steady and natural.

"A gentleman named Tyrwhite boards with you, I believe?"

"Waal, I guess he does, square, ef he didn't git everlastin'ly knocked out last night," drawled the landlord, lazily.

"Then he is not in, at present?"

"Waal, no, I guess he ain't, square. Nur he wasn't in no time last night, nuther, onless he tuck his bed on the floor, an' got tired enough of it tew skip outside afore day dawned, tew boot."

"Skipped? you mean run off?" faintly uttered Verner, his heart again turning sick within him.

"Waal, I ain't goin' quite that fur, jes' now, square," was the provokingly deliberate response of the Yankee. "Mebbe the young gent hung up some'ers else, fer the night. Mebbe he'll crawl 'round time fer dinner, or supper. Ef he don't I guess his traps'll kiver all damages."

"He left without paying his debts, them?"

"Waal, no, square, I ain't sayin' quite *that*, fer I guess he complied with the laws an' regulations o' the haouse, which call pritty laoud fer cash in advance, but—"

Jason Verner was not listening to him. His brain was busy, though after a sadly confused manner, compared to its customary clear and decisive action. And now he cut that deliberate drawl short with:

"You know the person called Stormy Steve? Has he a house or lodging-place in town? Can you direct me to him?"

"Waal, naow, square, I guess I maought, ef it wasn't that dinner-time's 'most onto—"

"Find me a guide, then, quick!" impatiently cried the almost distracted father. "I'll give him ten dollars to—"

"Money talks, square, an' ten dollars hits me right whar I live! Come 'long—pay as we trot—so!"

Long Eph was sharp and crisp enough now, and he caught Jason Verner with one hand, rushing him along toward the rear of the town where the hills came down to meet it. And his other hand was held with itching palm beneath the nose of his hastily accepted employer, the long fingers working eloquently.

The promised reward was paid him, and thrusting it deep into a pocket, Long Eph came to a sudden halt, saying:

"Thar—right long my finger, square. Stormy Steve runs that ranch. Smoke says he's up an' cookin'. Right ahead. You can't miss it. Call ag'in, square, when you want to find anybody—fer ten dollars a clip!" and turning on his heel Long Eph strode back to the Caravan.

At any other time, or under any other circumstances, Jason Verner would have resented this cavalier treatment, but now he hastened up the narrow, winding path that led to the little shack on the hills de. He hardly knew what he expected to gain by seeing Stormy Steve, but in his utter wretchedness he knew not what else to do.

He forgot how shamefully he had insulted the mad athlete only a few short hours before. He forgot that he had accused him of joining in a plot with Milo Tyrwhite against him and his recently awakened dreams of double wealth. He only remembered that, even while thus accusing him, he had recognized a man under that mask of mad humor.

He had almost reached the closed door of the little shack, when it was flung open by Stormy Steve—or, rather—Stephen Hasbrook. He had a frying-pan in his hand, but quickly placed it on a stool behind him as he caught sight of Verner.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, politely, giving no signs of having ever met the old man before. "Can I serve you in any way? If so, command me."

Jason Verner stared at the speaker in mute bewilderment, for the instant forgetting his terrible anxiety. Surely this was the same madman who had thrust himself into their room last night! The face, expression—but no; *that* was different. Yet this was certainly the same man!

The owner of the little shack smiled slightly, then said:

"I believe we met last night, though I hardly blame you for doubting your eyesight. *Then*, I was Stormy Steve, and acted the character. *Now*, I am Stephen Hasbrook, and ready to assist you in anything I can, if only to help rub out the disagreeable impression I must have left on your mind last night."

"If you will—if you only can!" muttered Jason Verner, unsteady both in voice and movement.

Hasbrook leaped forward and caught him in his arms, carrying, rather than assisting him, into the shanty. He placed him in a chair, and held a cup of fresh, cold water to his lips.

"You can trust me, Mr. Verner, despite what you saw of me last night," he said, his voice smooth and even, but ringing with an earnest manhood that seemed to instill hope in the sinking heart of the old man. "I am a strange fellow, if the whole truth is told, but I am not all bad. There are times, at long intervals, when I feel that I must go on a cyclone tear, or else go mad in sober earnest. When those fits take me, I am what you saw last night. When they work off the extra steam, I become a man again, such as I trust you will find me now."

Stephen Hasbrook saw that his words were giving the old man time to recover, and so, perhaps, he said more than he would otherwise have done. Now, as Jason Verner lifted his head, he added, earnestly:

"If I can do anything for you, Mr. Verner, please do not hesitate to tell me. My time is my own. I have nothing of importance to occupy me. I trust nothing has gone wrong with Miss Verner? The shock last night has—"

"She's gone!" gasped the old man, hoarsely.

"Gone!" echoed Hasbrook, his eyes beginning to glow with something of the fire shown by Stormy Steve. "Not stolen?"

"That—or worse?"

"What do you mean by worse? What can be worse than to have her fall again into the clutches of those devils in human guise? What can—"

He paused abruptly, a low whistle breaking from his lips, as though a startling suspicion just crossed his mind.

"You haven't seen anything of our young friend, Milo Tyrwhite, this morning, have you, Mr. Verner?" he asked, slowly.

Jason Verner sprang to his feet, all fire, all energy, seemingly fully restored to his wonted powers by that query. He shook his tightly-clinched fist above his head, and white bits of froth showed along his lips as he snarled:

"He's gone! He stole away in the night like a thief! Ay! and he stole my only treasure to take with him! May the blackest curses of an outraged—"

A firm palm covered his lips and smothered the fierce imprecation. Hasbrook held him by the arm, speaking rapidly, sternly, yet with a voice that seemed to soothe the mad man.

"Curse no one until you are fully assured that you have ample cause. Curb your wild temper—and pray Heaven may send you a better one! For, true as you stand there, Jason Verner, if your child has eloped, she has been driven to that rash step by your harsh treatment!"

"I loved her—she was all the world to me!"

moaned the wretched old man, sobbing like a child.

"As she may be—as she is still."

"Not if she has run off with that hypocrite and son of a hypocrite!" angrily flashed the father, with another sudden and complete change.

"What makes you think she has done this?" asked Hasbrook.

Before a reply could be given, a sonorous *ahem!* was heard outside the shack, and hastily opening the door, Hasbrook was hailed by Deacon Patmore, with:

"Hellow, old man! The devil's to pay down my way, an'—"

"Who are the parties most intimately concerned?"

"Them Verners, who struck town the—"

"Come in, then. Mr. Verner has come to see what I can do for him, but he is no fit condition for explaining matters. Now tell me just what you know about this affair."

That was not much more than Hasbrook might have already guessed from the words dropped by the half-distracted father.

The deacon had carefully examined the chamber assigned to Cedora Verner. He found the lock intact, the window uninjured, the room showing no traces of a struggle. A portion of the young lady's clothing was gone, together with a small hand-bag which he had particularly noticed on her arrival, since he had carried it into the house, and read on it her full name and address, cut in the silver plate.

That was all. None of the three other lodgers who occupied rooms at the Sanctuary that night had heard any suspicious sounds. The night watch had heard nor seen anything out of the common run of events. All that he could say with any certainty, was included in this terse account.

"It may have been the work of Private John Smith or some of his tools, but it looks more like an elopement," g avely commented Hasbrook, his brows knitting. "And all the more so that Mr. Verner says young Tyrwhite has skipped, too!"

"He stole her away from me—but I'll follow him to the end of the world, but what I'll tear her from his vile arms, and punish him!" muttered Verner, hoarsely. "I'll kill him! I'll tear his black heart out and—"

Stephen Hasbrook caught him by the arm and spoke sharply:

"You will do nothing of the kind, Jason Verner. You have wrought evil enough, one would think, with that savage temper of yours. And unless you pledge yourself to keep it in check and listen to common sense, you can look to others for aid. I will have nothing whatever to do with it."

"He stole her away—my one pet lamb!"

"And I pledge you my sacred word of honor that I will restore her to your arms, unhurt, your loving child still, if you will be guided by me," earnestly uttered Hasbrook.

"Do it—give her back to me, and I'll make you rich!"

"Stop!" and there was something of Stormy Steve in word, tone and look. "None of that, old man! I want none of your gold—there must be a curse upon it, or it would never work you so much misery! Dare to so insult me again, as to offer gold for my aid, and I'll—Bah!" with a short, hard laugh as he turned on his heel and took down a belt of weapons from where it hung on the side of the shack, buckling it around his waist. "I am a fool for noticing his words. Look to him, deacon, and when he starts to break out again in the same place, cram something into the hole before it sets me wild."

"You're goin' to take hold o' the case, then, Stormy?"

"Of course. I had a father once, myself. You keep him under your wing while I put the necessary machinery into motion. Bring him along."

Without waiting for word or reply, Stephen Hasbrook left the shack and hastened at once to Small Hopes, never pausing until he reached Billy's Bower. The saloon was open, and in process of renovation, but Ullman met him with a genial smile.

"Not so much damage, after all, Stormy, and the treasury—"

Hasbrook cut him short. He had no time to waste on such folly. And in a terse manner he made known his wishes; both Billy and Johnny—remarkably nimble for persons who had received such frightful injuries the past night!—helped to secure the men he wanted for duty.

An hour later, all were in readiness; a dozen good men, all well armed and mounted, sitting in a line before Stephen Hasbrook, who rapidly addressed them:

"Now we're clear of the town and beyond curious ears, you must know that young Tyrwhite, the man I had the little row with at the Bower last night, has eloped with Miss Verner. I want you to split up in couples, and take each trail by which they could have fled from town. Follow it hard. Bring them back, if you overtake them, unharmed, of course."

"No! kill him—kill him like a dog as he is!" snarled Jason Verner, who had insisted on bearing Hasbrook company.

"The man who tries it will have to answer to me, and when we meet, I'll be Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!" Hasbrook cried sternly. "If he shows fight, follow them until they try to get married; then warn the priest or squire to hold them until we can be notified. Off with you now—but remember! *No killing or harming!*"

The day was rapidly waning, and Stephen Hasbrook, with Jason Verner as his sole companion on that lover-hunt, was riding at a brisk trot along a rocky trail, miles from Small Hopes. As yet their search had been utterly fruitless, but the mad athlete did not yet despair, and kept encouraging the half-distracted father whenever his spirits seemed to flag too much. There was still ample time. And even should they have taken the wrong trail, some of the other parties might have met with better fortune.

Then—

"Halt! throw up your hands or die!"

Sharp and menacing came the challenge from as yet unseen foe, and instinctively the two horsemen wrenched up their jaded steeds, Jason Verner pale and trembling, but his companion instantly changing into Stormy Steve, all but his clothes!

A defiant roar parted his lips, and jerking forth a revolver in each hand, he opened fire the instant the crape-masked road-agents shot into view from their cunning covert.

Sharp, agonized shrieks and reeling forms told how true he was sending his lead, and the black riders recoiled for a moment as that fusillade was supplemented by—

"I'm Stormy Steve, the Worst Pill in the Box!"

"You're a liar, Stormy Steve! I'm Private John Smith, and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!" came a shrill, fierce yell, as the chief of the Awkward Squad spurred his horse forward, his pistols spitting fire.

Jason Verner saw Stormy Steve fling up his arms and fall headlong to the ground—he felt a benumbing shock, and dimly knew that strong arms were dragging him from the saddle. And just as his senses were floating away from him, he fancied he could detect that altered slogan—

"I'm Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad, and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

CHAPTER XIII.

PRIVATE JOHN SMITH.

WAS it an elopement, or an abduction?

Like her father, it was late that night before Cedora Verner fell asleep. Like him, she had so much to think of that her brain was too thoroughly aroused to admit of speedy rest.

Unlike him, however, her thoughts were full of joy and a delight that almost took her breath away! The black past was brushed aside, never again to haunt her! The one who had first won her maiden love—whom she had loved ever, despite those bitter black charges brought against him, despite her hasty casting him off without allowing him to plead his own cause, or even hear what charges had been brought against him—had proven himself true and worthy the best love of the proudest lady in all the wide land. His love was still hers, and there was not a cloud to be seen on all the bright heaven of the glad future!

Then came the gradual transition from waking dreams to sleeping visions no less bright and joyous. And then—

With a shivering gasp of terror, Cedora Verner opened her eyes to find the lamp rekindled in her chamber. To feel a cloth pressed over her mouth by a heavy hand, and a sharp, disagreeable prickling sensation at her throat. To see a black face bending close above hers, and hear a stern low voice pronounce the words:

"Not a squeal nor a whimper from your lips, my lady, or out goes your candle like a wet match in the teeth of a full-grown blizzard! Show common-sense and you shall not be hurt in the least!"

It was a business-like tone, and even in that moment of half-sleeping horror, Cedora Verner felt this—felt that did she refuse to heed the warning, the masked man would murder her without the slightest hesitation or compunction.

The thought seemed to paralyze her for the time being, rendering her limbs limp and nerveless, her tongue speechless, though her eyes seemed to be granted double powers and her brain was active as ever in all her life.

She saw that the bold intruder on her privacy was clad in plain dark garments. That his face was covered with a cloth mask, black, loose fitting, yet effectually preventing even the slightest possible glimpse of his features.

She saw that he was holding a long knife at her throat, the keen point of which seemed just on the verge of entering the tender skin. She saw that he was alone with her in the chamber, but with those eyes glowing so menacingly through the oblong holes cut in the mask, she dared not attempt to raise the alarm that might bring her assistance.

"It would never get here in time to save your wind, my dear lady," uttered the mask, with a low, guarded laugh—a laugh that had precious little of mirth or jollity in it! "I am

plain business from the word git-up! I put on no frills, but I generally manage to get what I reach out my hand for, all the same! In this case, that object is your precious self. I came to Small Hopes to-night for the express purpose of interviewing you, and if any outsider tries to chip in before I've fully arranged my game, somebody will suffer—bad!"

There was a movement in Cedora's throat as though she would speak, but the masked intruder increased his pressure on her lips, and she felt the point of the knife press deeper into the skin of her throat as he hissed warningly:

"Not a word, my lady, until I am sure you fully comprehend the situation. Listen to me, and make up your mind as you go along that I'm a hard pill to swallow when the sugar-coating cracks and begins to peel off!"

He suddenly raised the bright blade until it shone fairly in her eyes, then made a sweeping motion that painfully suggested the disagreeable idea of slitting a throat.

"That's the sort of prescription I give my patients when they cut up rusty and refuse to listen to their physician, my lady! Don't you make me spoil the looks of that beautiful neck, by acting without due thought; for what I put asunder, no man in all the land can join together neatly enough to make it either look or do well!"

Cedora shivered, but that was all. She made no attempt to cry out, or to free herself from that stern grasp. And after a brief silence, during which those keen orbs were closely scrutinizing her pale countenance through the eye-holes in the sable mask, its wearer nodded his head emphatically.

"Good enough! I see you are beginning to realize the situation at last, and now, if you please, we'll get down to bed-rock with as little loss of time as may be.

"Every one in the Sanctuary are soundly sleeping, save us two. Your father is the only one who rooms handy to this one, and I have taken the precaution to place him under the influence of chloroform—not to hurt, but just enough to thicken up the cobwebs in his brain, you understand.

"Still, you might manage to arouse him by screaming out, and of course in such a case, he would at once kick up a high old row, running at once to your assistance. And to something more, neither so gallant nor so chivalrous. In one word, my lady, to meet a nasty, sticky, mussy death at the point of this very knife!"

Cedora shivered, and her terror-stricken senses reeled for a moment at the terrible picture thus briefly conjured up by the words of her unwelcome visitor. He laughed, softly, not wholly disagreeably, if the tones alone be taken as a criterion, and then added:

"This, if you play the silly, hysterical fool. If you are gifted with even a moderate supply of common sense, nothing of the sort will take place, and your respected dad may slumber on until he wholly snores away the chloroform I administered to him.

"I want you to understand that I am one of most matter-of-fact rascals imaginable. When I mean spade, I say spade, and nothing but spade. When I say that I've taken all this trouble to secure you, it means just that and nothing shorter. It means that if the alarm is raised by you or by any one else, I'll kill them and carry you off in spite of all Small Hopes. Or, if I can't carry you off, I'll leave my knife with you as a token that an undertaker and a high lot on the hillside are all the comforts you'll ever need in this world!

"I reckon you can look the situation squarely in the face now, my lady, and with just one more caution, I'll free the safety-valve for fear accumulated silence may accidentally injure your b'iler! I'm a man of my word, be it given to friend or foe. I would as soon shed blood as spill a glass of whisky. I'll kill your father just so sure as you raise a row loud enough to bring him out of his bed. I'll kill you, if I find I can't carry you off as I have planned.

"I tell you this, and I'm Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad, and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

The masked road-agent removed his hand from the mouth of the young woman, folding his arms as he stood erect beside her bed, his right hand still grasping the haft of his long knife.

Silent, her tongue chained by his cold-blooded threats against herself and her parent, Cedora Verner gazed at his cloth-covered face, seemingly fascinated as by a serpent.

Private John Smith nodded his head approvingly.

"That's business, my little lady, and you're an honor to your sex. You can take good advice, and you can hold your own tongue; two valuable qualities which, in your charming sex, are chiefly conspicuous by their absence!"

"How have I harmed you?" faintly uttered Cedora, shrinking from that hard, mocking speaker. "What have I done that—"

"You have never harmed me, and you have done nothing that I can find fault with as yet," was the cool interruption. "I trust you will always be as considerate, for both our sakes. I begin to feel that there's more in womankind

than I ever gave them credit for, and—wouldn't it be a high old joke if I—Private John Smith, common thief, cut-throat, and rascal in general—were to lose my footing and tumble over head and ears in love? Holy Patriarchs! how the Awkward Squad would roar with laughter at the ludicrous spectacle!"

He laughed, at any rate, and seemed to hugely enjoy the comical idea; but Cedora shrunk still further away, her eyes growing wild with fear, her heart almost ceasing to perform its wonted functions.

Private John Smith saw this, and possibly fearing lest in her growing terror she might forget his warnings, he grew sober again, his voice smooth and even, but with a stony hardness underlying the surface that told how merciless he could be did the necessity arise.

"You don't appear to be in a jesting humor, my lady, so we'll come down to plain business, without any trimmings. You are to get up, dress, and prepare to go with me. If you do so quietly and decently, so much the better for all parties concerned. You shall never regret it. On the other hand, if you turn silly and try to cut up—well, I'll bundle you up in a blanket and tote you under my arm, though the whole town comes to bar the way!"

"I have never injured you, sir," sobbed Cedora, scarcely knowing what words she uttered. "Spare me—pity me—"

"As far as my business interests will permit, certainly," was the cool interposition. "I will step outside your chamber-door while you rise and dress, simply repeating the warning I gave you; cry out, or attract attention from outsiders in any manner, and you as well as they will suffer. That's talk with the bark on, but I'm a man of business, and time presses. Here I go—and if I were you I wouldn't stop too long primping. Something might happen to bring visitors, and then there would be a circus—red-hot!"

Private John Smith turned, and opening the chamber-door, stepped outside. He pushed the door to, only keeping his hand in the narrow crack, more as a warning to her that he was still close at hand and fully on the alert than from any fear she would attempt to close the door and bar him out.

For one instant the poor girl hesitated, then she slipped from bed and hastily dressed herself, not forgetting her bonnet which she tied upon her head. Then—with her nerves strung to desperation, with the fear of this plain-spoken outlaw ringing in her ears—she silently raised the window and secured it with a button hook. A single glance at the hand as partially revealed in the jamb of the door—then she blindly leaped out of the window, knowing naught of what awaited her below, thinking only that she might thus escape and raise the alarm in town without endangering the life of her father!

She fell heavily, and then strong arms grasped her—a thick muffler of some sort was flung over her head, twisting so deftly that her attempted shriek was killed even to her own ears.

Then a low, mocking laugh came faintly to her hearing, followed by the words:

"Good enough, little lady! I left that way open to you, as the easiest and surest method of getting you out of the hotel without raising a row. A thousand thanks for your ready wit!"

She heard no more. Her overtaken senses fled, and all was a blank for the time being.

It was Private John Smith who breathed those mocking words into her ear, and he uttered nothing save the simple truth. He had spared no pains to arouse her fears for her father. He felt confident that the poor girl would try to escape from his power by means of the window, and his men were stationed in readiness below, to grasp and silence her before an alarm could be communicated to the inmates or any chance passer-by.

"Good enough, so far!" he muttered, as he slung the little hand-bag which he had brought from the chamber with him, to his belt behind, leaving both hands free for using weapons in case the necessity should arise. "Handle her carefully, lads, but lose no time in getting back to the horses. If any fool spots us and thinks to stick a finger in the pie, leave him or them to us, and make the best of your way with the lady to our rendezvous. We'll do what throat-cutting is required."

Fortunately for all concerned, nothing of the sort took place. Thanks to the manner in which Small Hopes was built, with but the one street, nearly all of its buildings being strung along the two sides, a few minutes sufficed for the kidnappers to gain the hills to the rear of the Sanctuary, without being observed.

Ten minutes later, they were mounting their horses for a dash through the hills to their rendezvous.

Private John Smith received the still senseless maiden in his arms, making her position as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. He bade several men ride in advance to guard against their running into possible trouble without warning, following after them at a moderate pace. For, lightly as the feat is so often described, easily as the noble heroes handle their precious burdens, it is no fool of a task to carry

even a young and charming girl before one on horseback.

And, being only a matter-of-fact rascal, not a hero of either the faultless or the brigandish type, Private John Smith gave a sigh of decided relief when Cedora Verner gave signs of returning consciousness, and he immediately called a halt, as they were now at a comparatively safe distance from Small Hopes.

Relieved of his burden he alighted, and kneeling by her side, he very practically called the aid of a flask of strong whisky into action, bathing her face and forcing a goodly quantity of the stuff between her lips.

"Now that's hearty, my lady!" he uttered, approvingly, as the poor girl sat up and pushed away the offensive poison. "When a patient begins to refuse the medicine prescribed for her, thus showing herself true to nature—contrary—she's out of danger from that particular disease!"

"Where are we? Where are you taking me to?"

Despite his boasted matter-of-fact nature, Private John Smith was surprised by the firm, even tone of voice in which his captive uttered these questions. And as she spoke, her eyes gazed steadily, unflinchingly into his masked face. She seemed an altogether different person from the pale, trembling one whom he had surprised in her chamber not long before.

But he quickly recovered himself, and replied:

"You are here, and we are going to take you to the dingy hole where we hang out when the Awkward Squad is at home. Do you think you could sit a horse? Or would you rather have me carry you before me, as I have thus far?"

"If I must accompany you, let me have a horse to myself."

"And welcome, too," was the response, but with the quick addition: "Although what is your gain is my eternal loss!"

Another word brought forward a horse bearing a side-saddle on its back, and Private John Smith gallantly lifted his fair captive into the saddle, mounting his own horse and keeping close to her side as the little cavalcade resumed their winding course through the rocky hills.

For some little time they proceeded in silence, save for the occasional clink of iron shoes on flinty stones, but then Cedora Verner addressed Private John Smith, her tones even and almost hard:

"Will you tell me just why you have taken all this trouble to carry me off, and what you expect to gain by it?"

A low, not unpleasant laugh parted those masked lips, and Private John Smith replied glibly enough:

"As to the why—to save you from a worse mishap, lady. You toss your head and frown, but what I tell you is Gospel truth, even if it does come through the lips of a rascal. You may refuse to believe me, but time will prove me one of your best friends. You hate me now—you would like to see some strong hand drive the very knife which I used to awe you to silence, back there in the Sanctuary, hilt deep in my heart; providing, of course, that I am supplied with such a superfluous organ! Am I not right, my lady?"

"You have given me little cause for holding your life as of inestimable value, truly!" Cedora bitterly exclaimed.

"Which is a roundabout way of saying yes!" laughed the chief of the Awkward Squad, lightly. "Well, perhaps you are right. I admit that I am working with a view to feathering my own nest with plumes of gold, but still, I repeat, I am proving your best friend, just when you need friends the most.

"True, I have abducted you, and in doing so I had to use rather harsh measures; but all has happened for the best, and as time rolls on, you will be one of the very first to make the admission."

Cedora vouchsafed no reply to this glib but somewhat enigmatical declaration, and Private John Smith was well content to drop the matter for the present.

For a long time the party rode rapidly through the hills by trails that wound and twisted in almost every direction at one time or another. Cedora tried to take close note of their course, with an eye to a possible flight, but ere long she grew utterly bewildered, and it seemed a wholly unnecessary caution when Private John Smith finally called a halt and drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, spoke to his captive:

"We are drawing near the end of our journey for the time being, Miss Verner, and these bright eyes of yours must submit to being blindfolded for a brief space. Sorry to do it, but business is business, you know!"

"As I am helpless, of course it must be as you say," was the quiet response.

"Now that's hearty!" nodded the road-agent, approvingly, as he dismounted and assisted his captive to alight. "It's monstrous kind in you, too, showing how much more valuable you are than I at first appraised you! Well, I reckon the old gent can stand a few thousands, more or less, without pinching his money-bags perfectly flat."

"You have stolen me away from him with the intention of demanding a ransom, then?" ex-

claimed Cedora, a ray of hope coming into her face as she uttered the words.

"What else?" ejaculated the matter-of-fact rascal. "You are a mighty choice bit of human flesh, lady, but where that is good for only one thing, gold can supply a thousand! And there isn't a single lady killer in the whole Awkward Squad! Hold still a moment—so! Now, your arm, and off we go!"

Blunt, rude as was this speech, the young woman gave a heartfelt breath of relief, and it was with a much more hopeful spirit that she accepted the guiding and supporting arm of the matter-of-fact road-agent.

He led her by a devious course, turning, twisting, retracing their steps as though purposely trying to confuse her sense of locality; then there came a change of air, and she knew they had entered a cavern of some sort.

CHAPTER XIV.

PRIVATE JOHN SMITH SUPPOSES.

"LOOK here, fellow, what do you expect to make out of this little job, anyhow?"

"You tell, boss!"

"Who's at the bottom of it all?"

"Ef anybody axes ye that, boss, jes' tell 'em it's a lie."

"I'm asking you, lunkhead!"

"An' I'm answerin' of ye, ain't I, boss?"

He certainly was, after the same provoking manner he had displayed every time Milo Tyrwhite approached the subject, and this was at least the two dozenth time since the first. And for the five-and-twentieth time Milo Tyrwhite turned his back upon the cool rascal, grating his teeth savagely, his hands tightly clinching, his whole being tingling with a fierce desire to leap upon the smoking varlet and crush the life if not the longed-for information out of his mouth!

An age seemed to have elapsed since the sudden assault upon him just as he was about to enter the Caravan, though calmer reason told him that so very many hours could not have rolled by. He had no means of measuring time, save by his own rapidly beating pulse, for his watch had vanished with his liberty.

He knew that he had struggled vainly against his strong and cunning kidnappers. He knew that with the muffer twisted about his head and shoulders he had been dragged or carried to a safe distance from the Caravan, and then, despite his utmost efforts to break away, his limbs were tied and his eyes blindfolded so dexterously that in his fleeting glimpse of his captors, he could only distinguish the fact that they all had black faces, either real or disguised—perhaps masked.

They forced chloroform upon him, and though he brought all his powers to hold the subtle drug at bay, he could not entirely succeed. Despite himself his brain grew dull and languid. He could no longer control his muscles as customary. Yet he could hear and distinguish all that was said and done about him, though something like a man only half awake.

He knew that he was carried to some little distance out of Small Hopes, before being placed astride a horse and tied to the saddle, front and rear. He knew that they rode at a goodly pace for mile after mile through the broken ground, until the day seemed about to dawn before they reached their destination. He remembered trying to keep a mental record of their course, for the blind had been removed from his eyes as soon as the little party were fairly under way; to photograph as it were, each crook and turn with a view to future possibilities; but before the end arrived, his eyes were once more placed under cover, and when he at length was told the journey had ended, and he strove to pass in fancy over the route, all became a confused jumble, and—did he fall asleep?

That must have been the case, for when he could take up the mental record again, he was lying on a pile of dry grass and leaves covered over with a blanket, with another one keeping him warm. There was a dim, smoky lantern hanging from a stick thrust into a crack in the rocky wall. Beneath this rude light, a rough-clad figure sat, his face hidden from view by a cloth mask, and surrounded by blue smoke that rose from the bowl of a pipe, and curled lazily from his nostrils.

This was the fellow whom Milo Tyrwhite had questioned time and time again since then, receiving answers promptly enough, but of information not one whit, after, in exchange for a threatened assault, the rascal said, showing his ready tools:

"The boss said I was to treat ye white, long's ye 'aved yerself; but I was to keep ye right thar, ef I hed to salt ye down fer a high lot. I don't want to do that, but I will, ef you try to climb up my back, honey!"

"Who is your boss? What's his name? Why has he committed this shameful outrage against me? What have I done to bring his enmity upon my head after this fashion?"

"Shell I wait ontel he comes, to sling them at him, boss? Or would you ruther I writ 'em down an' called the nigger sarvint to tote 'em to the boss?"

"Tell me his name—can't you do that much?"

"Waal, ef you'll on'y jes' hev patience ontel I

smoke another pipe or two, mebbe I kin 'member the name, boss!"

And so it was, until the prisoner gave over in disgust, resolved to curb his fierce impatience and boiling anger until the chief rascal should see fit to put in an appearance.

Had only his own liberty or welfare been at stake, Milo Tyrwhite might have endured the trial with a much better grace, but he feared that a still heavier blow was meditating, even if it had not already been dealt. He feared that evil was intended Cedora Verner. He believed that Private John Smith was at the bottom of his present predicament, and that his capture was but a single move in a desperate game that boded ill to his loved one and her parent.

It was this haunting fear that made him so often break his first angry resolve to maintain a dignified silence until some one came to him who would be willing to answer his questions without such mild evasions as those employed by his guard. It was this fear that led him to actually start toward that guard, to kill or escape; but a shrill whistle brought the dim shapes and plainer muzzles of half a score rifles to view in the narrow passage beyond the guard, and common sense seconded the stern and significant warning thus conveyed.

He was sorry afterward that he had not risked all at that moment, for before another hour crept by he was heavily ironed hand and foot! He had length of chain enough to permit his walking at a certain rate around his narrow room, and the links which connected his handcuffs permitted him to feed himself and perform such little duties as his bodily comfort demanded; but that was all. The guard still sat at the mouth of the narrow passageway, to repeatedly evade the impatient questions of his charge.

Milo Tyrwhite had hardly sunk back on his rude couch in disgust after his interchange of words with the affable but decidedly non-committal guard, as recorded at the head of this chapter, when he saw that worthy cast aside his pipe and leap to his feet, bringing his rifle forward to a neat salute. And then a black-masked man entered the little rock chamber, speaking in a peculiar, high-pitched voice:

"Your servant, Milo Tyrwhite!"

"Who the devil are you?" sourly demanded the young man, springing to his feet, his eyes aglow, his ironed hands closing almost savagely upon the heavy chain which connected them.

"The devil I am—or one of his most devoted imps, at least," was the laughing retort. "And being such, allow me to humbly hint that those who think to handle me without first carefully looking to their gloves, are pretty sure to come off with badly scorched fingers! This is not a threat, you understand, merely a hint."

It was a hint that Milo Tyrwhite fully understood, and despite his naturally fiery, impatient temper, he realized the wisdom of bearing it in mind. Reason told him that he had nothing to gain and all to lose by bringing on a fight; unarmed, opposed by numerous foes, there could be but one ending.

"I owe my being here to your kindness, I presume?" he said, his tones cold and hard, through strong resolution.

"Well, yes, to a certain extent you do," was the deliberate response. "I found it the easiest method, all things considered, to remove one who threatened to make trouble when I came to carry out my little game against Miss Verner."

At that name, Milo Tyrwhite forgot all his good resolutions, all his enforced prudence, all the terrible odds against him, and with a fierce, grating curse, he leaped upon his foe, striking at his head with the irons about his wrists, with the chain, with his fists as well.

Only to have his impetuous rush neatly eluded—to have those gloved hands close upon his person with a resistless grip—to be twisted from his feet and heaved high into the air, while his antagonist roared savagely:

"Say your prayers, if you know any, for your time has come—and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

At that wild, peculiar slogan, nearly a dozen armed men crowded into the entrance from the passageway, but they stood silent spectators to that strange scene. They seemed to feel that their chief needed no aid from any of them.

For one gasping breath Milo Tyrwhite hovered above the head of his captor, then, with a short, hard laugh, he was gently replaced upon his feet, the mask falling back a pace or two, his arms folding over his bosom.

"Warning number one, Milo Tyrwhite!" he said, his tones as smooth and even as though he had not just performed a feat that not one man out of ten thousand could have wrought.

Dizzy, his brain whirling, the young man staggered back against the wall of rock, gasping:

"Stormy Steve—you are Stormy Steve!"

A short, hard laugh came from beneath that sable mask.

"You can't prove it, Milo Tyrwhite. Stormy Steve is a drunken, crack-brained blowhard, with an abundance of muscle but precious little wit. I am Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad. I am no hero such as you read about. I'm nothing better than a common

thief, cut-throat, and rascal in general. But when I set up a mark in my mind's eye, I generally come pretty near getting there on time. I don't sling on style. I have no use for frills and scallops. I am not the luckless victim of untoward circumstances, whom a malignant fate has driven from the narrow path of honesty to the devious ways of sin that lead to death and perdition—not a bit of it, my dear fellow!

"I'm a sinner, because it pays better than honesty. I've taken to cutting purses and slitting throats as a pure matter of dollars and cents. I'm above all things, a business man, of the stripe that would turn his own grandmother out of a comfortable grave without a pang of remorse or trace of pity for the venerable dame, should a tenant come along and offer a dollar higher rent for the apartment."

"That's the breed of cats I come from, young man; but, after all, I might be worse than I am."

Milo Tyrwhite hardly understood, even if he heard, this strange series of stranger assertions. He was completely bewildered by the discovery he had made, as he believed; for surely there were not two men in the same region who could handle him with such ease! This was Stormy Steve—it must be! And until that moment he had so fully trusted the mad athlete! If wild, he was honest, and likely to prove a true friend to Cedora Verner should danger threaten her again. And the thought had given him much consolation during his tedious imprisonment. She whom he loved so earnestly, would not be left with only a weak old man to guard her. But now!

A grain of mental anguish came from his lips, and feeling how utterly helpless he was, Milo Tyrwhite covered his face with his hands, breaking down and letting tears, hot and scalding, flow freely from his aching eyes.

Private John Smith made a motion with one gloved hand, and the armed men turned and passed out of sight, even the usual guard bearing them company, leaving him alone with his prisoner. He stood with arms folded across his full chest, gazing steadily upon the shivering form of the sorely-stricken youth. Not a sound passed his lips. He waited, patiently.

Not for long. Almost as suddenly as he had broken down, Milo Tyrwhite recovered himself. He dashed the tears from his eyes with his ironed hands. A hot fire leaped into them that seemed to scorch all moisture in an instant. He rose to his feet, forcedly calm and outwardly composed, his voice hard and metallic as he uttered:

"Say what you came to say, then have the common decency to leave me to myself, Stormy Steve!"

"I am not Stormy Steve, I repeat," was the cold, even retort. "I'm bad enough, low enough, but I draw the line at that. If a criminal, I am not a lunatic, thank—Satan!"

"But you are a liar. I have felt his grip, as well as yours, and I know that two men of such muscular powers never trod the footstool at one and the same time. If you are not Stormy Steve, lift your mask and show your face."

Without a word, Private John Smith complied with this almost savage demand. He lifted the sable mask, and Milo Tyrwhite stared in speechless amazement, for he looked upon a countenance dark and rugged, a face which he had never before seen, as different from that of Stormy Steve as human features well could be!

"Are you satisfied, my friend?" quietly asked the outlaw as he replaced his mask securely over his dark face. "If I did not hope to place you under everlasting obligations to me before many more hours roll by, I would not have yielded so far; for my face, such as it is, is none too handsome to bring its owner's neck to the gallows, should it be published to the world and laid before the eyes of the law-hounds."

There was no reply. Milo Tyrwhite was again cast into complete bewilderment, he had been so sure this masked man was none other than Stormy Steve. Now—he knew not what to think!

With a low, easy laugh Private John Smith spoke again:

"As for the other side, I have no occasion for asking who and what you are, for I am already fully informed. To prove the truth of this assertion, listen:

"Your name is Milo Tyrwhite, recently of Boston, the youngest living son of James Tyrwhite, deceased. Of your immediate family, there is but one other alive, your elder brother, Albus Tyrwhite, well known in certain mining circles. When a lad, he ran away from home. He sought and made his fortune. He one day concluded to look up his relatives. He found that you, his cousin, Cedora Verner, and his uncle by marriage, Jason Verner, were all that remained of his connections, remote or near."

"He sent for you all to come out and meet him at Small Hopes, when he would divide his superfluous wealth among you. You obeyed. So did Jason Verner and his charming daughter."

"Jason loves neither you nor your brother, but his hate proved weaker than his love of gold. That hate was powerful enough, however, to break off your engagement with his daughter,

and had not his miserly instincts gotten the better of him, this rupture between you two might have remained forever unhealed. For that, at least, please thank me!"

"You!" echoed the bewildered young man.

Private John Smith bowed, with a low, amused laugh.

"So I said, and I'm too matter-of-fact to lie without an object."

"I came in answer to a letter from my brother!"

"Let it go at that, for the present," laughed the outlaw.

"Do you mean to say that it was a vile forgery?"

"I mean to say that you are not quite as thoroughly posted on the situation as I am, my dear fellow," was the light retort. "As a proof—do you know that at this very moment all Small Hopes is on tiptoes about you? That all Small Hopes firmly believe you have eloped under cover of the night with Miss Cedora Verner?"

An angry cry escaped the lips of Milo Tyrwhite at this cool assertion, for such it was, though put in the form of a query. For an instant he seemed on the point of leaping at the throat of the outlaw, but a warning gesture checked him. As well dash his bare head against that rough stone wall, as to attack this giant in strength with unarmed hands!

"That is the common belief, but, of course, I need not tell you what a silly mistake it is. All the same, the lady has vanished from view, and as you also disappeared from town the same night, the inference is not so remarkably strange. You are given the credit, anyway. Armed scouts have been sent out along each trail, to track you up and forbid priest or parson marrying you until Jason Verner can come up with you. He himself took the road, pairing off with Stormy Steve—and I'm happy to say that the big blowhard met an obstacle in the road who promptly convinced him that there was a still worse pill in the box, despite his windy claims on the title!"

"You murdered them!" gasped Milo, hoarsely.

"Stormy opened the ball, and I upset his house, of course; the old man I had a better use for, as you shall see. And now that the preliminary trenches are dug, suppose we get down to sober business?"

Stunned, confused, Milo Tyrwhite made no reply. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his own ears, and though the man in the mask told a plain, straightforward story on its face, he tried to doubt, to think it all a cunning lie!

"You still doubt me, I see," laughed Private John Smith, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Suppose I say to you that in addition to bringing you here, I also abducted Miss Cedora Verner. Suppose I have her here, with her father, Jason Verner, in another part of this dingy den where the Awkward Squad spend their leisure moments in striving how to become shining lights in their honorable profession? Suppose I come to you with a precious treasure in my hand! Suppose I say to you that I am able to give you the hand of the girl you love with all your heart, in marriage? Suppose I add that I can do this, and also gain the consent of the crabbed old gentleman to said marriage?"

Milo Tyrwhite stared at the speaker in amazement, scarce able to believe his own ears. Then he gasped, hoarsely:

"Why do you come here to mock me like this? Who are you?"

"Call me Cupid, if you like, my dear fellow," laughed the man in the mask, lightly. "And as Cupid, I'll agree to lead you into the gates of paradise to the arms of your angel, and introduce you to Hymen—if you will consent to play your part precisely as I line it out for you."

His voice seemed full of earnestness, despite the outer cloak of mockery which he cast about it, and the young man's heart throbbed far more rapidly than was its wont as he listened. Still he could not believe—surely it was some bitter jest on the part of his captor!

"Verily you are a doubting Thomas!" Private John Smith added, his glowing eyes seeming capable of reading all the mad fancies that whirled and tossed and tumbled about in that over-excited brain. "Suppose we keep on 'supposing' for a little while longer. Mind you, I'm not swearing to the gospel truth of all I tell you, though I'll not admit, either, that I am supposing a lie, or more than I can prove. You have got to take at least a portion of this dose on faith, or it passes away from your sight forever!"

"What do you mean?" hoarsely demanded Milo Tyrwhite, with a desperate effort regaining at least outward control of his strong emotions. "If you tempt my patience too far, I'll kill you, or you've got to kill me! I swear it!"

"Either of which would be a calamity sufficiently great to upset the earth and bring on chaos!" laughed Private John Smith, with a mocking bow. "But as the easiest method of averting such, let me continue with my suppositions:

"Suppose your long-missing brother was a little superstitious. Suppose he wanted to make his only near relative happy before death claimed himself. Suppose in hunting you up he learned all about your troubled love affair, and determined to smooth out the tangles, thus making you and her happy, while at the same time he would be paying off his old score against Jason Verner."

"Suppose those letters were a lie, and their only aim was to bring you all out here where he could carry out a bold and original scheme without being too much overshadowed by the strong arm of the law."

"Suppose he was an odd devil, fond of theatricals after his own way. Suppose he saw that the old man would be far more amenable to fear than to argument or reason. And looking at the matter from this point of view, suppose he played a bold and risky game to bring you three together where he could carry on his plot with ease and safety. Suppose he has a regularly-ordained gospel-sharp right where he can put a hand on his shoulder when the proper time comes—supposing it *should* come—and bring him up to the altar where the blushing bride, the happy groom, the willing father, are all awaiting him."

"Suppose this was all true, and suppose it carried out to the very letter, how grateful would you be? How much would you be willing to give to have all this *supposition* prove to be nothing more than the plain, unvarnished *truth*?"

Pale and trembling, Milo Tyrwhite gazed upon the masked man as he deliberately uttered these strange sentences. His brain was whirling, his heart throbbing so violently that he felt he must suffocate!

Was this more than a ghastly jest? Was this man really his long-missing brother? Was such bliss in store for him?

He reeled as the masked man ceased speaking. He made a desperate effort to regain his self-control, and then cried:

"I would give Heaven and earth both for that! I love her so madly, so entirely—I would almost mortgage my soul to the foul fiend for one year of bliss with her!"

His raging passions choked him, but Private John Smith seemed satisfied with what he had said. A peculiar laugh came from beneath his mask as he turned on his heel, saying:

"Well, I'll leave you for a bit to your own thoughts, my dear fellow. Think over what I have supposed, and I'll see you later. Ta-ta, old fellow!" and he strode away from the cell.

CHAPTER XV.

PRIVATE JOHN SMITH PROPOSES.

At the further end of the narrow passage, Private John Smith of the Awkward Squad found the guard of free speech but carefully locked-up information, and with a whispered word sent him back to resume his position and duties as before.

It was dark at this point, but apparently the road-agent had familiarized himself with every foot of his dingy den under the surface of the earth, for he made an abrupt turn and strode rapidly on until he reached a barricade of some sort through which a dim light could barely be distinguished.

"Miss Verner!" he called aloud, his voice clear and far from unpleasant.

"Who calls on my name?" came the response, after a brief period, as of doubt or hesitation.

"Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad," half-laughed the man in the mask.

"What is it you wish?"

"An audience, fair lady. Will you grant it?"

"Were I to refuse, of what avail would that be?" came the response, in a bitter tone.

"Not a cent's worth of good—and that's a fact, little one," laughed Private John Smith, as he extended his hand and lifted the barrier, which proved to be a square of heavy tapestry, weighted at the lower edge, thus serving the purpose of a door for the entrance to the chamber.

He passed under the tapestry, allowing it to drop again behind him. He was confronted by Cedora Verner, her little form drawn to its utmost height, her blue eyes glowing and sparkling with mingled anger and scorn.

The matter-of-fact road-agent did not appear to be in any wise awed by this exhibition of rebellion, but cast his gaze leisurely around the rock chamber—a duplicate of the one occupied by Milo Tyrwhite as to size and shape, though it was plain enough both were the work of nature's hands. In size and shape alone, however, were the two prisons alike.

A stranger suddenly set down in that chamber would hardly suspect the actual fact, for the walls were gracefully festooned with evergreens, the irregularity of the roof was hidden by smoothly stretched cotton cloth, while a carpet covered the floor beneath.

In one corner stood a neat single bedstead, provided with snowy linen and blankets of fleecy white wool. Beside it stood a cane-seated rocking-chair. Yonder were two other chairs, and between them a light stand supporting a

porcelain-shaded lamp, several books, a lady's workbasket, and other articles.

At the foot of the bed stood a washstand, provided with all necessary toilet articles. Above this, suspended from the wall, hung a mirror of good size.

In the next corner to the rear was a small stove of sheet-iron, its slender pipe rising and turning, then passing from view over the top of the suspended tapestry.

Private John Smith nodded his head in silent approval as he concluded these observations, turning toward Cedora Verner, who was proudly, angrily watching him.

"Not so bad, after all, all things being taken into consideration! Eh, my pretty little tragedy queen?"

"Sir!" haughtily ejaculated Cedora Verner, frowning at the mask as though she expected to awe or abash him.

Instead, his brilliant eyes seemed to fill with a peculiar satisfaction as he again nodded his head. This time it was with the air of one who finds he has made an exceptionally good bargain, greatly to his own surprise.

"Sir, is good—decidedly good, little lady!" he said, with a light laugh, as he drew one of the chairs forward and dropped into it with lazy grace. "I expected to be greeted with atrocious ruffian! villainous destroyer of helpless innocence! at the very mildest. Allow me to thank you most kindly, Miss Verner, for your unexpected lenience! But—by the way!" and he rose to his feet with an awkward bow. "Excuse my impoliteness, which I assure you proceeded more from ignorance than impudence. Please be seated."

The young lady drew herself up even more haughtily than at first, if that were possible. Private John Smith laughed softly as he shrugged his broad shoulders and dropped again to his chair.

"Wrong again, eh? Well, that's the end of my trying to put on scallops, or to fit the mantle of politeness to my matter-of-fact shoulders! If you'd rather stand up than sit down, far be it from me to waste words in idle argument. If I'm not overwise, I know that when a woman wills she won't—particularly when another individual tries to convince her she's wrong."

Despite herself, Cedora could not maintain her first rigid *hauteur*, there was something so peculiarly odd in the tone and manner of this masked man. She hesitated, then silently seated herself in the rocking-chair.

"Now, that's more like it," bowed Private John Smith, rubbing his gloved hands together with an air of satisfaction. "Looks less as though you were trying to repel a persistent book-agent, or some other disagreeable reptile!"

"You force yourself upon me, and being helpless, what else can I do—but patiently await your pleasure for enlightening me as to the object you hope to gain by forcing me to receive you," stiffly responded the young lady.

She was dimly conscious that she was affording the matter-of-fact rascal no little amusement by her tragic airs, but while she could, she resolved to stick to the line of conduct she had marked out for herself during those long, long hours of painful waiting and wondering and fearing.

"First, how have you been treated since your arrival? I gave orders to my awkward rascals to treat you like a queen, an empress, and all that sort of thing!"

"I have nothing to complain of, save the loss of liberty," was the less steady reply.

She started and trembled as a short, peculiar laugh came from behind that sable mask. It sounded so hard, so merciless, yet at the same time so full of sneering mockery!

"The day for that has passed away, forever, my dear child," and the voice which pronounced the words rung out sharp and cold. "Every moment you have passed here has been under guard. When the time comes for your departure from this den, you will still be guarded, both night and day, until death comes to you or to your careful watch. And by that time you will be so accustomed to the habit that, I'm open to bet a pile, you'll not be able to rest easy until you have found another guard to take the place of the first, provided the grim old scythe-bearer spares you for the tougher morsel!"

"What do you mean? I don't understand you, sir!" stammered Cedora, shrinking from those glittering orbs which shone so brilliantly through the twin apertures in the sable mask.

"That before you leave this snug retreat, my lady, you are to be provided with a husband," laughed Private John Smith.

A cry of burning indignation burst from the lips of the fair captive, and her little hand clinched tightly as though she would like nothing better than to dash it against the lips that dared to pronounce such a shameful threat.

"How dare you, villain!" she panted, shortly.

"I don't want to, if I can get my own head out of the noose by thrusting another into the snare," was the prompt and candid response.

"But whenever the old gentleman from the lower regions sets out to accomplish anything special, you know, things have to fay in, somehow, like it or dislike it!"

"Naturally, you feel like kicking. I don't

blame you one bit; so would I, if I thought it would do any good. Like the rest of the young ladies, you have had your own peculiar fancies about getting married. You have formed your particular ideal, and rather than abate one jot or tittle from that exalted standard, you'd die, perish, become a martyr, and all the rest of it! Exactly. And, as I said before, I don't blame you.

"Still, it's got to be, little one! To employ the vernacular, it's Hobson's choice with you—a ground-hog case. Not to put too fine a point on it, you've got to make up your mind to accept Milo Tyrwhite as a husband, padlocked to you as tightly as a regularly-ordained gospel-sharp can do the job, or here you will pass the remainder of your natural life, a prisoner in the hands of the Awkward Squad!"

Cedora Verner sunk back in her chair, pale as death, trembling in every fiber, her brain whirling until all objects before her grew dim and indistinct. She could not believe the evidence of her own ears!

Who was this strange being? What was his object in first abducting her, and then declaring she should marry the man she loved with all the fervor of her young heart, under penalty of being held a captive until death should come to release her?

Who was he? What object had he to gain? Surely it could not be all a cunning plot on the part of—

She refused to entertain the wild fancy even for an instant! Milo Tyrwhite, dearly as she felt he loved her, would never stoop to gain his ends after this fashion—not even for her hand would he subject her to such an ordeal!

Private John Smith watched her face as closely as a cat might watch a mouse, and a low, mellow laugh parted his lips.

"Not a bit of it, my dear child! You wrong the young gentleman by the mere fancy. Milo Tyrwhite had naught to do with your abduction, with your detention here, nor with the plot that is to end in your marriage. His part begins only when you give your consent to the wedding ceremony. All the rest you owe to me, Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad!"

"Why—what for—your motive?" stammered the bewildered maiden, scarce conscious what words fell from her lips.

"Through the pure milk of human kindness, my dear lady!" laughed the outlaw, lightly. "I'm a matter-of-fact rascal, as a general thing, but once in a great while there crops out a brief vein of romance in my nature. This is one of them. My notice happened to be drawn toward you two turtle-doves. I saw that it was a decided case of two hearts that beat in tune as perfect as the wings of a honey-sucker, and so you see the result!"

"I do not fully understand you," slowly uttered Cedora, pressing her hands to her painfully throbbing temples as she tried to concentrate her thoughts.

What did it all mean?

"You want the plain pill, without any extras, eh?" laughed the man in the mask, then his voice grew sober, his manner hard and even cold as he resumed: "Very well. You are here in my power, to use or abuse as my own sweet will dictates. I have captured Milo Tyrwhite, and can bring him into your presence at a minute's warning. For certain reasons which shall be kept in the background for the present, I prefer to bid you good-by only when you are a lawfully-wedded wife.

"I know that Milo Tyrwhite fairly worships the ground your feet leave an impress upon. I have my reasons for thinking that he is by no means repulsive in your eyes. So, to cut the matter short, I come here to plead his suit, to pop the momentous question in his behalf. I ask you if you will consent to lift him into the seventh heaven of supreme bliss by marrying him, if I provide a regularly ordained minister of the gospel. And having asked you, I await your reply."

As Private John Smith proceeded, the pallor faded away from the cheeks of the listener, and a rosy flush came in its place. Her eyes drooped, her hands rose until they hid her face from view.

Strange as were the circumstances under which this proposal was made, it caused her to thrill and tingle in every fiber. The mere thought was sufficient to make her forget for the moment that she was a captive.

Could it be true? Was it real? Or was this all a cruel, heartless jest, to be followed by some malicious exposure?

If so it was admirably carried out to this stage by the masked man. He seemed fully in earnest. And yet—

She dropped her hands and gazed into his masked face with a sudden courage that surprised herself even more than it could him. She spoke rapidly, sternly, almost with fierceness:

"If I had the strength of a man, your answer should be one befitting your insolence, sir! Are you done? If so, leave me! Decline, and I'll at least shame you before your less vile tools by shrieking aloud to them for help!"

"This is your answer, then, Miss Verner?"

coldly asked the outlaw as he rose to his feet. "I am to go back to Milo Tyrwhite and report that you consider yourself outrageously insulted by the mere thought of a union with him?"

It was a merciless speech, and with a gasping sob, the poor girl sunk back in her seat, covering her eyes, half-distracted by her wild emotions.

Private John Smith shrugged his shoulders, that peculiar light increasing in his eyes as he added:

"Before I rid you of my unwelcome presence, Miss Verner, permit me to say that you may go further and fare worse. You had best take a few moments in which to reconsider your refusal to marry Milo Tyrwhite. As I said, it is Hobson's choice. You must take him for your husband, or another who may not suit you nearly so well!"

"What do you mean by that?" flashed Cedora, glancing up to the sable mask.

"That I have determined this gloomy den shall witness a wedding, with you as the bright particular star. That if you will not accept Milo Tyrwhite as the groom, your husband shall be—Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad!"

Sharp and clean-cut came the words. There could be no mistaking them. And unless they could bear false witness as eyes rarely can, those blazing orbs which glowed through the twin apertures in the sable mask said the speaker meant each and every word he then uttered!

Instead of cowering the maiden, as he probably anticipated, that blunt speech only lent her renewed courage and spirit. She shrunk from him no longer. Instead, she boldly confronted him, her pale face stern and resolute, her blue eyes glowing.

"Rather death, ten thousand times over, than that!"

Private John Smith laughed, dryly.

"Complimentary, you are! All the same, I don't know but what you are pretty nearly right. I've never tried it, though I expect to take the plunge, one of these days, as a sort of recompense for my wickedness—by way of mortifying the flesh and doing penance, you know!"

"Soberly, my dear lady, I earnestly trust you will reconsider your resolve and accept the offer I have made you in behalf of our mutual friend, Milo Tyrwhite. If you remain obstinate—if you persist in declining him—I'll have to do my best to fill his shoes. If I am so compelled—the consequences rest on your own pretty head, little one! For I've sworn to marry a widow within the year, and I'm too big a coward to even think of committing bigamy!"

Despite her outraged feelings, Cedora Verner could not help shivering with a cold chill as she listened to that curt speech. It was worse than a threat shaped in open terms.

She turned away in the vain hope of concealing the effect his words had produced on her, but the low, mocking laugh which fell from his lips told her how useless this action was. It served another purpose, that laugh. It again nerved her to confront this matter-of-fact rascal, with at least an outward show of scorn and defiance.

"You threaten murder! It is a brave speech, and well befitting the dastardly lips that give it utterance!" she cried, with contempt ringing in her voice.

"I am glad you think so, little one, for, of all things, I pride myself most on being consistent," was the retort.

"You need not wait even one day of the year—kill me now, if you are not a coward as well as scoundrel!"

"I never thought of that!" ejaculated Private John Smith, with a short laugh. "It takes a woman to plan and devise, after all! I'll just scratch it down in my memory, and think it over when I've more time to spare.

"Now, Miss Verner, I will give you still another chance. If you are wise, you will wait a bit before throwing it over your shoulder.

"Suppose I say that I can and will bring your father to give you away when you stand up to wed Milo Tyrwhite? Suppose I pledge you the word of a thief, cut-throat and rascal in general, to obtain your worthy dad's full and free consent to your wedding Milo Tyrwhite. Will you marry him then?"

"Never—by force!"

"But if no force is used? If I bring Milo Tyrwhite here to plead his suit in person? If you first hear your father give his consent? Will you yield then?"

Cedora Verner hesitated, her heart throbbing painfully hard and rapidly. She loved Milo Tyrwhite as women in these days seldom do or can love. She knew that it would be heaven on earth to belong wholly and solely to him. And feeling this so wholly, little wonder that she hesitated before replying. But then outraged modesty and true womanliness came to the rescue, and she firmly responded:

"Not even then, unless he can assure me on his word of honor that he has had no part or parcel in this vile scheme of yours! Dearly as I love him now, I would more than hate him then—I would despise and loathe him!"

"Good enough!" exclaimed Private John Smith, in a tone that seemed running over with admiration. "It is all settled, then, for I swear to you that the honest young gentleman is clean-handed as an angel fresh from paradise!"

"You swear!" scornfully cried the maiden, her lips curling, her eyes flashing. "You—a self-confessed thief, cut-throat, kidnapper—all that is vile and evil and loathsome! Your oath! It is worse than nothing in my estimation!"

"And your very humble servant to command," coolly supplemented Private John Smith with a mock ceremonious bow that hid his glowing eyes from her scornful gaze. "That is, until—"

He paused for a few moments, recovering his perpendicular and holding her gaze fast with those glittering orbs. Then, in a hard, metallic tone he added:

"Until your truly feminine obstinacy obliges me to play the master, instead!"

He bowed again, then turned on his heel and lifting the square of tapestry that shut in the little rock chamber, he passed beyond it and was hidden from her view.

Cedora Verner sunk back in her chair, covering her face with her hands, her brain whirling, her heart almost suffocating her with its agitated pulsations. And little wonder!

CHAPTER XVI.

PRIVATE JOHN SMITH DISPOSES.

THE chief of the Awkward Squad was having a little New Year's round of his own that evening, judging from the scant time he lost between calls on his guests. And having left Miss Verner quite as much subject for thought as he had not long before given Milo Tyrwhite, he strode along the passage which led to another chamber in the hollow hill, much larger than either of the others.

This natural apartment was but dimly lighted up by rude and not over-clean lamps. It contained but little in the way of furniture, though it was undoubtedly the general "room of all work" for the Awkward Squad, judging from the stale odor of cookery, smoking, and unmade beds which consisted mainly of dry grass and leaves, a few extra clothes and blankets which were worn alike by horse and man.

There was nothing like a table, and the seats consisted in part of loose rocks, in part of dry chunks of rotting wood, eked out with an occasional saddle.

When Private John Smith entered the chamber, it was occupied by perhaps a dozen men, rough clad, their faces scrupulously hidden by black masks of cloth. Each man was provided with arms of the latest pattern, and something in their general demeanor would give one the decided impression that they knew right well how to handle them, despite their peculiar and not over-complimentary title of the Awkward Squad.

They one and all sprang to their feet as their chief came into view, saluting him with their rifles. He nodded in recognition, but said not a word to any of their number, passing direct to a corner of the rock chamber where a thin, gaunt form lay at length upon a rude pallet of grass and blankets.

The figure moved at his approach, and turned a pale, haggard face toward him. As the dim light fell athwart it, one might have recognized Jason Verner.

Private John Smith apparently had no secrets from the members of his gang of outlaws and cut-throats, at least as far as this prisoner was concerned, for without lowering his voice or bidding the men fall back, he spoke harshly:

"Well, old codger, how do you reckon you feel, by this time, anyhow? More like a meek and forgiving disciple? Any the less bilious? Or do you still imagine that this world revolves simply for your particular benefit?"

Sorely shaken though he looked, Jason Verner was stung to something like fury by the sneering, insulting tone of the outlaw, rather than the words his lips pronounced. This was their first interview since his capture, though he had repeatedly begged the men to bring their leader to him that he might effect some compromise with him. Not one word could he extract from their lips. They would listen with close enough attention, but that was all. And his naturally irritable temper grew sharper and sourer as the hours wore on, until, when the opportunity he craved was afforded him, he could not accept it as he wished. Instead, he burst into a torrent of revilings and cursing that apparently gave Private John Smith much greater delight than if they had been equally warm blessings and protestations of gratitude.

With folded arms he stood his ground until the old man, worn out by his fierce outburst, sunk back upon his rude pallet, paler than ever, his thin lips tinged with white froth, his sunken eyes glowing redly like those of a cornered wild beast.

Then he spoke, his voice hard and un pitying: "You've had your turn at the bellows, Jason Verner; now comes mine. Unlike you, I shall not waste time in idle cursing, for I'm a man of business, pure and simple. My tongue hangs

free enough, but with such vermin as you, every wag it makes stands good for a dollar when the bill is finally made out and presented for payment.

"You have been calling on me almost constantly since you were brought to this palace, some of my recruits tell me. You tried to make them believe that much depended on your securing an early interview.

"Well, I have come to you, in my own good time, and if you don't bitterly repent the meeting long before it is over, then I'll confess my mistake in your character, and admit that you are a much smarter man than I had any idea of!"

"My child—she's gone!" muttered Jason Verner, with a husky groan that told how intensely he had suffered during those few hours of imprisonment. "That treacherous hound has won his point, thanks to your interference, curse you! Only for that I might have been in time—might have saved my child and killed him—killed him like a dog—like a dog!"

Savagely he groaned the words between his teeth, repeating them as though even that faint satisfaction helped to cool his aching brain!

"Never you mind dragging the young couple into action just at present, Jason Verner," coolly interposed the chief of the Awkward Squad. "You are my particular persimmon for the time being, and if I don't draw all the pucker out of your wrinkled hide before I get through with you, set me down as the falsest of all false prophets!"

Something in his hard, merciless tones brought Jason Verner back to his old selfishness, and shrinking from those hotly-blazing eyes, he muttered in a whining voice:

"Haven't you tortured me enough, monster? I'm an old and failing man, with but few days before me at the best. I am not rich—they lie in their throats who say the contrary! I'm a comparatively poor man, but if you will set me at liberty, I'll pay you any reasonable sum by way of ransom—any reasonable sum, I repeat!"

"As a matter-of-fact rascal, gold talks music in my ears, of course, old codger, and you will have to bleed freely if you ever last to see the light of another day. But gold is not all.

"I'm a mighty bad man, Jason Verner. I have slit more throats than you can count on your fingers and toes, and made twice as many two-legged riddles with my guns. If my tastes ran in that direction, I could carpet, paper and fresco this palace with scalps, and still have enough left to stuff a mattress. I never slept sounder in all my business career as a thief, cut-throat and rascal in general, than I did the night after I watched three children dance—"

He paused abruptly, turning his face toward a dark passage opening from the other side of the rock chamber. He could distinguish the sounds of loud and excited voices, mingling with the rapid trampling as of men engaged in a desperate struggle for life and death!

A hoarse, yet ringing roar came from beneath his sable mask, and his gloved hands snatched pistols from his belt as he cried aloud:

"I'm Private John Smith, and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box!"

A single tremendous leap carried him half-way across the rock chamber, but then he paused, his figure drawn rigidly erect, his arms extended, his gloved hands clasping a brace of revolvers, the muzzles of which covered several men who just then entered the apartment.

"Don't waste powder, boss!" cried one of the foremost, throwing up an empty hand and shrinking from that stern and menacing front. "It's all right now."

"What's all right? What means this disturbance?" sternly demanded the chief of the Awkward Squad.

"Stormy Steve! I jes' knowed it!" uttered a high-pitched and cracked voice, coming from a man who was tightly grasped by several men in masks.

"Old Tom Moore, the Relic of '49!" ejaculated Private John Smith, seemingly not a little surprised.

"You hear that, durn ye?" whined the Relic, with a glance of mingled anger and injured feelings toward his captors. "He says I'm what I tole ye afore. Reckon you'll let up a little on the ole man, won't ye?—bigger lunk-heads I never see!"

It was indeed the ragged, dirty, red-nosed bum who took such an abrupt leave of the company gathered in Billy's Bower, on being accused by Bill Jones with being his employer, Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad!

And twisting himself free of his captors, he stepped forward, one dingy paw outstretched, his hairy face one huge grin, seemingly feeling assured of a cordial reception.

"How goes it, mate? Ef you won't putt on the cider-mill too orful powerful, I'd like to shake! Gone into mournin' I reckon, sence I see ye down at the Bower? Waal, waal, sech is life in the Far West! Now ye see it an' now ye don't! Now you're livin' an' the next step you topple into the— Eh?"

His glib speech came to an abrupt termination as Private John Smith brushed his dirty

hand aside with a sweep of his pistol-barrel, none too gently, either!

"Who is this animal, anyhow, men?" he demanded, coldly.

"Why, don't you reccomember your old pard, Stormy?"

Private John Smith lifted his hand, and the masks caught the bumper by arm and body, throwing him to the floor, binding him hand and foot and thrusting a gag into his mouth with a degree of dexterity and skill that spoke volumes for their training. Then all fell back but the one who had first replied to the stern challenge of Private John Smith.

"Speak out, lad; what does this all mean?"

"Waal, boss, it comes to jes' this. The critter you see here," and as he uttered the epithet, he touched the helpless Relic with the toe of his boot, after a fashion that wrung a muffled howl from his lips, "was ketched skulkin' mighty s'picious like 'round the outside, es ef he wanted to diskiver more then any one man o' his stripe hes any right or reason fer to know. An' so I jes' tuck some o' the boys an' jumped onto him. He said he wasn't doin' no harm—went on with the durndest string o' lingo you ever hearn!—but I reckoned mebbe it mought be best fer to fetch him in whar you could take a good squar' look at the varmint. Fer, boss, ef my nose hain't gone back onto me wuss then it ever did afore sence I fu'st struck the scent, thar's a mighty loud smell o' the law-courts 'bout his duds—they is, or I'm clean gone lunny!"

"You caught him inside the den, then?"

"Not the fu'st off, boss. Ye see, we was totin' him in here, when the durned slipper critter broke away from our hooks, an' kicked up the devil's delight, red-hot! They's heap too much limber muscle in his hide fer it to go nat'ral with sech old ha'r as he kivers his face with!"

"You think he is disguised, then?"

"Ef he ain't, boss, his skin grows mighty loose on his jaws, anyhow," laughed the mask, as he caught up a lamp and held it so the light fell fairly athwart the face of the Relic.

It was as he said. That shaggy, matted mass of hair and beard was plainly a cunning disguise, now twisted awry and flatly betraying its owner!

With a muttered curse, Private John Smith stooped and caught hold of the hair with his gloved fingers. A vigorous twitch, and it came off in his hand, leaving exposed a smooth-shorn face, at that moment filled with an expression of stern defiance and undaunted spirit.

With a short, hard laugh Private John Smith cast the disguise to one side, daintily brushing his fingers as he did so.

"You have done well, my gallant recruits! I'll bear this service in mind when pay-day comes again, for, unless I am greatly deceived, this fellow is poison clean through!"

"I knowed my nose couldn't be so mighty off, boss!" grinned the mask, his chuckle combining gratification with pride.

"You have only made one mistake: you should have brought a noosed rope with your game. Go and get one. And you, my man, a word in your ear," added Private John Smith, as he turned to another of the guards.

The men hastened away briskly. Jason Verner, intensely interested, he could hardly have told why, unless it was that the unmasked prisoner had addressed Private John Smith as Stormy Steve, watched the result with breathless attention.

The chief of the Awkward Squad stood with folded arms, gazing intently down upon his prisoner. The captive returned this gaze with unflinching steadiness, his gray eyes glowing vividly, only the gag between his jaws preventing him from giving his defiance still plainer vent.

The second messenger returned first. With him came the guard who had been stationed at the entrance to the cell occupied by Milo Tyrwhite, and between them marched that young gentleman himself.

With a wild, harsh cry, Jason Verner sprang to his feet, staring at the prisoner as though a ghost had suddenly risen in his path. And before he could fairly recover from the first shock of the discovery, a motion from the chief's hand sent two of the outlaws to his side, in readiness to check any rash or ill-advised movement on his part.

"That cur!" gasped Jason Verner, glaring at Milo. "Here, with the other—with Stormy Steve! Fool, blind fool that I have been! It is all a cunning plot—a villainous plot!"

He tried to spring forward, but was caught and held helpless by the two outlaws. And Private John Smith turned his sable mask that way, sternly speaking:

"Gag the old fool if he dares break out again after that fashion! And you, Milo Tyrwhite, will show wisdom if you take a caution from what you see befalls him. I have had you brought here to use your eyes, not your tongue. I want you to see just what sort of character you are dealing with. You can judge me by the manner in which I am about to treat this spy!"

Just then the other messenger returned, with a long rope, in one end of which was a running noose. At a sign from the chief, this noose was

placed around the neck of the unmasked prisoner, and he was lifted in their arms, borne to the rear wall near the passage, where a projecting point of rock afforded a pretty fair substitute for the arm of a gallows. The slack was thrown over this, then the rope drawn tight enough to hold the Relic—for lack of a better name—securely on his feet.

"Remove his bonds, so he can enter the happy land of never-come-back-again with free feet, at least!" coldly laughed Private John Smith. "Free his jaws, also; he may wish to leave some message for his brother bloodhounds!"

His orders were obeyed without question or hesitation. Then, his feet at liberty, his jaws free, but with his hands still bound behind his back and the noose about his neck, the person whom we have thus far known only as "Old Tom Moore, the Relic of '49!" sharply cried:

"Thank you for nothing, Stormy Steve, alias Private John Smith, alias Fremont Quarles, thief, forger, assassin! You see, if I am a bloodhound as you call me, I have some of the bloodhound's attributes! I know you for what you really are!"

A short, contemptuous laugh came from beneath that sable mask, and there was nothing of alarm or chagrin in the voice that followed with the words:

"Right in part, my blood-sucker, but wrong in the rest."

"Of course you would deny it—never yet a criminal as utterly vile as the bloody past has proved you to be, that was not a bald-faced liar as well! You are Stormy Steve. You are Private John Smith of the Awkward Squad, who—"

"Who came on the scene at the very same time your blowhard Stormy Steve was cutting up his antics in Small Hopes," interposed the outlaw. "How do you account for that?"

"Another man in a mask may have played your part, or—"

"A thousand other things all equally improbable," laughed the other sneeringly. "Like all the rest of the rogues who take a fancy to play the role of detective, you are better at inventing lies and disguises than you are at solving them.

"You have hunted for me. You have found me. But in finding me, you have found something else—your death!"

"That won't save you, though you could hang me a thousand times over, Fremont Quarles!" boldly cried the detective. "I have sent in a report that will end in fitting a noose about your throat, try as you may to escape! I hoped to bring you to the foot of the gallows myself, but I'll die knowing that I'll hang you by proxy! Now do the worst, you devils!"

As he spoke, the detective gave a dexterous twist and leap that caused the rope to fall from the point of rock, then hurled himself into the midst of those who were awaiting the signal for hauling him up. The entire mass reeled back into the dark passageway, and only the sounds of their desperate struggling came to the two pale, agitated spectators, Milo Tyrwhite and Jason Verner.

"Take him alive!" shouted Private John Smith, savagely. "I have sworn to hang the blood-sucker!"

"We've got the critter, boss!" panted one of the men, reappearing and casting the rope over the point of rock.

"Then up with the cur! No further dilly-dallying!"

The men rushed back, some supporting the hampered body, others catching hold of the rope and hauling on it until the ragged figure once more stood erect beneath the rude gallows.

"Up with him, lads! Walk away with that rope, then fasten it snugly and come to my side! Lively, you bulldogs!"

With a wild cheer the men obeyed, and the swaying figure was hauled up until his feet were clear of the floor, turning and twisting, kicking convulsively, shaking the taut rope with its vain struggles.

It was a frightful scene, and both Jason Verner and Milo Tyrwhite covered their faces or averted them, to shut it out.

Private John Smith turned toward them, laughing harshly as he saw this, and his voice rudely uttered:

"Bah! I thought you were men, not silly, weak children! If a pleasant spectacle like this so horrifies you, I really fear you will hardly undergo what fate—and I am her deputy!—has in store for you both! Look, if you are not cravens! See how Private John Smith serves those who hunt for his blood! Look—and take the warning home to your own hearts!"

He whipped forth his knife, and hurled it through the air with a skill that buried it hilt deep in the writhing body! He held out his gloved hand toward his men, and as rapidly as they could place knives in his grasp, he repeated the blood-curdling feat, until the body fairly bristled with knife-hilts—until its struggles ceased, only moving by the impulse lent by those terrible missiles!

"That will do, I reckon," he said, with a hard laugh. "Take the carrion and pitch it into the pit, lads," and he turned to Jason Verner, who was trembling like a leaf, adding in a

voice cold and composed: "As I started to say, when this little incident came to interrupt me, I am a man of business, pure and simple, even though I am the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Milo Tyrwhite turned pale while Verner shivered with fear.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN OF BUSINESS.

Was he man, or was he demon?

Surely, if a single trace of all that goes to make man higher and nobler than the brute of the fields remained in his composition, neither word, tone nor action betrayed that fact. He seemed utterly heartless, and appeared to take pride in making the fact known beyond the possibility of a doubt.

Milo Tyrwhite shrunk from him, sick at heart, praying that his wild fancies of recent moments might be proved false! He had almost convinced himself that the wily hint dropped by Private John Smith when he placed that subtle temptation before him, was true—that this seeming tragedy was but a bold farce; that it was an eccentric brother's scheme for making two loving hearts happy, and at the same time paying off old scores against the sour, crabbed, suspicious old man who had been the prime means of driving him into exile when a lad.

But now—never a brother in such an utterly heartless wretch! One who could not only doom a helpless captive to a cruel death, but who could so devilishly mutilate an already dying man! Who could turn from that atrocious scene and pick up a broken sentence without the slightest tremor betraying him—cold and unmoved, cruel as the grave!

Better death than take a bride from such hands!

Jason Verner was moved also, but after a different fashion, as might have been expected from his totally different character. His blood grew chill within him and he shrunk back from the chief of the Awkward Squad, but it was more from personal fear than any higher sentiment.

"I can put on a few extras, when necessary, or when the fit strikes me," coolly added the road-agent, apparently unnoticing their agitation, "as you may have noticed just now; but I don't make a regular practice of it. And now—listen:

"I took you in out of the wet. I contrived to coax Milo Tyrwhite to pay me a little visit. And, as a capseaf, I concluded to make the family circle complete by adding Miss Cedora Verner to my list of guests. She is now beneath the same roof that shelters you, dear sir!"

For a brief space Jason Verner stood like one paralyzed, though the announcement could hardly have taken him utterly by surprise after what he had seen and heard. Then, his own fears were lost sight of for the moment, and with a savage burst of fury he sprung with curved fingers at the road-agent, clawing and spitting like an enraged cat.

Those gloved hands dexterously caught and held his arms harmless, but they could not so easily check the words that hissed through his grating teeth:

"Devil! vile plotter! I knew it—something told me from the very first! Curses on my head for neglecting the warning! I knew you were scheming for him—for Milo Tyrwhite—but I'll foil him yet. I'll die a thousand deaths before yielding!"

With a short, sneering laugh Private John Smith pushed the half-insane wretch away from him. Jason Verner turned toward Milo Tyrwhite, who cut him short with grave, earnest speech.

"As Heaven hears me now, Mr. Verner, you are doing me black and bitter injustice! I swear that I have had no hand in this plot, if plot it be. More—I swear that I will not profit by it until everything be made as clear as day!"

"And I, as a man of business, am ready to fully bear this young fellow out in his assertions, Mr. Verner," quietly cut in Private John Smith. "He knew nothing of my plans concerning either you or your charming daughter. He was wholly ignorant of your presence here until little more than an hour ago, when I gave him the information."

"A lie—all a lie—curse you both!" gasped the old man, sinking down upon his pallet, his limbs refusing to bear his weight any longer. "But I'll baffle you in the end! I'll foil you both, if it kills me!"

Private John Smith turned and lifted one gloved hand. A number of his Awkward Squad had, until then, occupied the same apartment, though apparently paying no attention to what was going on at the other end of the rock chamber. Now, without a word or sound, they vanished from sight, leaving the three men alone together.

Private John Smith stood with folded arms, gazing through the twin apertures in his sable mask at the old man, who glared back his defiance, suspicious and hatred.

"You knew—what? Your suspicions? What do they amount to?" the road-agent sneered, his voice hard and vicious.

"That you are Albus Tyrwhite!" was the hoarse, strained reply. "That those letters

were no more than a cunning decoy to entrap me—to wring gold from me, through threats and mayhap murder! The gold to you—my child to—"

His voice failed him, and he crouched on his pallet trembling in every fiber. His worst enemy might have felt a trace of pity for him then!

Private John Smith laughed, his tones musical and mellow as though they came direct from a pure and honest heart. It was one of those abrupt and complete changes which made him such a puzzling enigma.

"Wonderful! most wonderful!" he exclaimed, lightly. "How many more times are you going to alter my spots for me? Only a bit ago I was Stormy Steve, and—"

"So you are!" snarled Jason Verner. "You're the same who played the madman in town—the same who led me into that trap, while pretending to aid me in finding my child!"

Private John Smith quietly lifted the sable mask from his face, bending nearer the old man. In mute amazement the latter stared, for he saw a darkly-bronzed face, no more like that of the mad athlete than day is like night!

"So much for that wise supposition, my dear sir," laughed the road-agent as he covered his face again and resumed his former position. "And time will prove your other discoveries precisely as wide of the truth as this one; that I swear to you by my credit as a thief, cut-throat and rascal in general. I am no more Albus Tyrwhite than I am Stormy Steve."

"As for the rest, I admit that you are not very far wrong in your guesses, always excepting your including Milo Tyrwhite as a willing partner in the little game. You have been brought here to be bled, figuratively speaking."

"I'll die first!" snarled the miser, desperately. "Not a red cent of my money shall either of you handle, though you torture me for a year at a stretch! I'll never yield!"

"Yes you will, my dear sir," was the cool retort. "Not only will you yield, but you will do it with a good grace. You will give your daughter free permission to wed Milo Tyrwhite. You will yourself give the charming bride away, and afterward join with Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad, in drinking the health, long life and endless bliss to the happy pair!"

Jason Verner strove to reply, but his organs of speech failed him. He cowered there on his rude couch, glaring up at the man in the black mask, trembling with more than rage and hatred. The old fear had returned, with redoubled force. It was as though the hand of death, rendered visible, hung threateningly over his head, already beginning to fall!

"You have already made your will, Jason Verner. In that will, like a true and thoughtful papa, you have bequeathed all your property, of every description, to Cedora Verner, your sole surviving child. You will pledge yourself by all man holds holy, by an oath that even you will not dare violate, let the temptation assail you never so hard, never to make another will that can in a single item alter this disposition of your property."

He turned abruptly and uttered a shrill whistle.

The same road-agent who had all along acted as guard over the cell in which Milo Tyrwhite was confined, promptly appeared in answer to the signal, and Private John Smith said:

"Escort this gentleman back to his old apartment. Treat him civilly, unless he attempts to break away. Should he be so foolish, sound the alarm and subdue him, without any more harshness than you can avoid. If he should escape, say your prayers before you come to report to me; you'll have no time then."

"One moment, first," coldly uttered Milo Tyrwhite, as the guard advanced to take his arm. "One word with you, rascal!"

"Two if you like, dear fellow," was the light retort. "I am in an unusually talkative humor this evening."

"You may break down the spirit of a feeble old man like Mr. Verner, but you can't break mine. I'll have no part in this vile scheme of yours, even though it promised to lead me through the gates of Paradise itself!"

"In other words, you'll refuse to play a part at the proposed wedding?"

With an impulsive movement, Milo Tyrwhite lifted his manacled hands, but before he could strike, the guard slipped between him and Private John Smith, with a readiness to take the blow that caused the prisoner to hold his hands from some sentiment not far akin to shame.

Private John Smith laughed mockingly, without showing any emotion at the self-devotion displayed by the guard.

"You tried that once before, my lad, and made precious little by the action. Don't make me look upon you as a fool, even if you are in love. Take him away, my good recruit, and bear my instructions in mind, for your own sake."

Milo Tyrwhite made no resistance. He knew that he could not hope to cope successfully with Private John Smith alone, from past experience, while he also knew that a single call from the

lips of the road-agent would bring a dozen stout men to the rock chamber, ready to do or die in his behalf.

Private John Smith watched them until they passed from the main chamber, then turned once more to Jason Verner.

"You heard him speak, Mr. Verner, and as you pride yourself on being a prime judge of human nature, you should be almost ready to own up to your mistake in setting him down as a scheming plotter against your wealth. Not that I expect you will go quite that far, in words; you are terribly obstinate in your ways, and would rather be wrong than make the admission. You see, I am tolerably well acquainted with your nature."

He paused, but if it was for the purpose of receiving an answer from Jason Verner he was doomed to disappointment. The old man lay glaring up at his sable mask, but not a sound or a word escaped his lips.

"So much the better," laughed the rascal, mockingly. "I do love a silent partner when my tongue is in full wagging trim. I'll do the talking, and you can keep up a devil of a thinking, if that suits your humor better!"

"Possibly you wonder why I took the trouble to send Milo Tyrwhite away? Well, I don't mind admitting that I have taken a peculiar fancy to that young fellow. Why? Well, again, it may be that I am superstitious. I had a dream, not long since, in which the devil appeared to me in all the glory of horns, hoofs and forked tail—with sulphur and brimstone and other popular perfumes distilling from his person fit to kill! And the devil told me that for certain little transgressions of his laws—for my too kind heart, you know!—it was written in Hades that I should marry the widow of—"

"I failed to perfectly understand the name of my unlucky predecessor, but his majesty showed me a neat photograph of the gentleman, pictured on his thumb-nail; and it was that of Milo Tyrwhite! Remembering this, and suspecting that the poor fellow would hardly relish even a ghostly hint of such a fate, I called for his guard to take him away in time."

Again Private John Smith paused, and once more not a word nor sound came from the parched lips of Jason Verner.

This sullen silence seemed to sting the road-agent, despite his pretended nonchalance, and his tones grew harder and more vicious as he spoke again:

"Enough of nonsense! I'm going to get down to solid business, Jason Verner, and if you are anything better than a crack-brained idiot, you will ponder well over the matter before you repeat the refusal you made a bit ago! I can bear a good deal, but there has to be a line drawn somewhere. And when I am crowded across that line, look out for breakers! You will find me the worst pill in the entire drug-store, then!"

"I'll never yield! I defy you to the death!" hoarsely muttered the old man, his eyes fairly glaring with hate, mingled with fear and desperation.

Private John Smith laughed mockingly as he cried:

"Good! you can sing, then? I almost began to think fear had driven you to absolute idiocy! That point settled satisfactorily, here goes:

"Without letting you wholly into my scheme, I admit that I am playing a bold game for a heavy stake. I have laid out considerable money, more time and much more hard thinking, before I succeeded so far as to bring you, your daughter and Milo Tyrwhite all beneath one roof. That was by far the hardest part of the game, and you can wager your sweet life that no common obstacle can make me throw away all that I have already won! Certainly a little extra devilishness won't make me take water and throw up my hand. Nor one, nor two lives, neither!"

"A good deal of the result depends on you, Jason Verner. You have refused to play the part assigned you, but I think I can persuade you to reconsider this decision. Perhaps not in a single breath; that would be too much to expect from one as full of the mule as I know you to be. Maybe not in a week, nor in double that length; but sooner or later you've got to come to Limerick!"

"I'll torture you until each inch of flesh on your wicked old bones shall cry out for mercy with a thousand tongues. If you are still deaf to reason, and refuse to heed their complaints, then I'll try what mental torture will accomplish."

"There is one good point about you. You love your daughter, Cedora. Ah! you squirm!" he laughed, maliciously, as the wretched old man showed signs of being touched to the quick.

"Good enough! I'll play first on that tender string, in hopes of saving us both—me trouble, you worse than that!"

"It is part of my plot to have Miss Verner married to somebody, and that in a precious hurry. Never mind why. I have my reasons, and they are good ones, as you shall admit, directly after the ceremony is performed."

"I discovered that she loved Milo Tyrwhite, even as he was spoony over her. I discovered that you had separated them in the past, by a

bit of trickery that did more credit to your brain than your heart."

"It's a lie!" muttered Jason Verner. "His own devilish hypocrisy and evil nature parted them!"

"Let it go at that, if it please you better," lightly retorted the road-agent. "It is enough for me, just now, that they were and are still sweet on each other. That casts the part of consenting wholly on your side, for when you appear to join their hands, they'll not throw the gift over their shoulders!"

"I've taken an oath by the horns, hoofs and forked tail of Old Nick, my patron saint, that Miss Verner shall never leave this palace until she is a lawfully-wedded wife! If you are positively determined that Milo Tyrwhite shall not lead her through the golden gates of matrimony, no doubt I'll be able to scare up another man to fill that position. I'd take it myself, only I've registered a solemn oath never to wed until I find a widow that wholly fills my ideal fancy. True, I would sooner backslide than slip up for good and all in my plans, but I can get around that, I guess."

"For instance—and that means for sure, in this case, I want you to bear in mind, old gentleman!—I will get up a sort of auction or lottery, in which Miss Verner shall be entered as the grand prize. My men shall draw lots for her, and the lucky fellow shall play the part of bridegroom!"

It was a truly devilish idea, and Jason Verner groaned aloud in bitter anguish as he listened. All his wild, dogged resolution vanished as he pictured what would be the wretched fate of his idolized daughter should this demon in human shape carry out his vile threats!

"Then," mercilessly added Private John Smith, clearly unmoved by the misery he was pouring in such heavy loads on the head of his helpless victim, "when the knot is firmly tied, I will manage to put the bridegroom where the dogs can't bite him, and perhaps—who knows? since she will make a truly charming widow!—I may take a notion to become a Benedict myself, and step into his hastily vacated shoes! Stranger things than that have come to pass in this world of wonders!"

"You devil!" gasped Jason Verner, almost beside himself with wretched misery and fear for himself and his dearly beloved child. "What have I done—what has she done—to deserve all this torture? What can you hope to gain by it?"

"You forget your wealth, my dear sir," laughed the rascal.

"Take it—take every dollar, just so you spare her, my poor, helpless child!" groaned the wretched old man.

"That begins to sound a little more like it, I must confess," laughed Private John Smith. "But talk is cheap. It was only a bit ago that you swore I should never finger a red cent of that same money. Just now you feel different, but the moment I took off the thumbscrews you would remember how very dearly you love gold, and—pop goes the weasel!"

"Besides, I may want more than your gold. It is barely possible that my little game runs deeper than even your vein of *oro*. It may even be— Well, suppose we do a little 'supposing,' for a change?"

"Suppose your seemingly wild suspicion was really founded on truth? Suppose I am really the long-missing Albus Tyrwhite—suppose I still feel that old grudge against you, and am taking this method of working it out? Mind you, I don't say that this is actually the case, but suppose it was."

"It may be that I am tired of leading a life of sin, when any day may bring my neck and a rope in contact. I may feel inclined to bid the road good-by forever, and fleeing far from the scenes of my raids on honesty, settle down as a deacon—a noble pillar of the church!"

"As a poor devil, I'd be sure to prove a failure. With your wealth, I would make a brilliant success of it. And suppose that I resolved, as a part recompense for the loss of her dowry, to make Miss Verner happy as Mrs. Milo Tyrwhite. Would not that help take the curse off?"

"Or—take your choice, my dear sir—suppose this all a silly lie! Suppose anything you please, except that you can escape the grip of Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad—the Worst Pill in the Box!"

Jason Verner shivered all over as he gazed and listened.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BOUND TO HAVE A WEDDING!

PRIVATE JOHN SMITH apparently cared very little what effect might be produced on his prisoner by this last speech, for without pausing to take note of it, he turned on his heel and once more sounded that shrill whistle. And as before, one of the men with black masks promptly answered the summons, gliding swiftly through the dimly-lighted rock chamber and standing before his chief in silent attention.

"Go and bring that pussy little text-slinger here."

The fellow saluted in true military style, turned on his heel and strode away, while Private John Smith once more confronted his truly wretched captive, his voice hard and vicious.

"I'm playing both ends against the middle, just now, you see, Jason Verner! If you show good, common sense, this gospel-sharp can make the arrangements with you for the wedding I am bound to bring about, will-you or won't-you! If you hang fire and insist on being a stumbling-block in the path I have lined out, why, he can hear your prayers or your confessions or whatever one of his cloth feels it a duty to do in the case of a poor devil who is on the point of leaving this world of misery and woe, by the elevated route! You *sabe*?"

"Have you no pity—no mercy!" gasped the old man.

"Plenty for those who goes my road; not a smitch for all who insist on crossing my trail ahead of the hounds. For the first, I've got the good hand of a partner through thick and thin, until death doth us split in twain. For the other—you shall judge for yourself, and right speedily, unless you put a taste of Indian rubber into that stiff backbone of yours!"

Not very stiff did it seem, just now! Let his faults be what they might, and they were many, Jason Verner was suffering enough in his mind to more than make amends for them all! Not only on his own account, though his fears were great and torturing, for he was by no means a physically brave man; but on behalf of his only child, they were still greater. And for her sake, leaving himself entirely out of the question, he was almost tempted to yield and give this demon in human shape full play!

"It could hardly be any worse—it might be much better for the poor child!" he muttered, hardly conscious that his lips were giving audible shape to the whirling fancies that filled his aching brain.

Private John Smith heard them, though, and his eyes glowed and glittered through the holes in his sable mask, until it seemed as though they would set it afire! He made no comment, though. He was no fool, let him be what else he might. He knew that words from his lips just then could do him no greater service than those busy fears were working unaided.

The outlaw messenger soon reappeared, escorting a meek little gentleman in dingy black, plump in figure, rosy in face, mild in voice, and looking strangely out of place in that den of wickedness.

He bowed politely to the salute given him by Private John Smith, but after that his entire attention seemed drawn toward the old man lying on the pallet. With the quiet movements and gentle sympathy which told of many hours passed in like employment, he passed the outlaw chief and knelt beside Jason Verner, his fat little hands gently searching for the injury he evidently expected as a matter of course.

A short, hard laugh broke from those masked lips.

"It's his stubborn spirit that needs your attention most, dominie, just at present. The wedding of his only child, which you have come here to celebrate, has agitated him so powerfully as to bring on an attack of the spleen. Physic won't phase it, but a little well-applied persuasion from saintly lips may do the work. Try it, if you please!"

The mere sight of that kindly face where all else were hated and merciless enemies, seemed to revive the failing hope in the heart of the prisoner, for temporarily forgetting his recent decision, he cried out sharply:

"Don't be talked over by that merciless demon! Don't let him force or lie you into doing this horrible wrong to an innocent and defenseless girl! If you dare perform that sacrilegious ceremony, I'll curse you with my dying breath!"

If he was little and fat and insignificant looking in person, the Rev. Hiram Cowden had a heart as big as the best, and a moral courage that no peril or threats could daunt. He rose to his feet, saying quietly:

"Rest at ease, dear sir. I shall never violate the vows I have taken upon myself. No mortal has power sufficient to make me perform aught that my reason or conscience tells me is wrong."

The eyes of Private John Smith snapped wickedly through their holes in the black mask, but his voice was smooth and easy as he spoke again:

"And I am the last man on earth to persuade you to fly in the face of that truly admirable resolution, Brother Cowden. At the same time, I'm afraid you are taking a wrong estimate of the case, thanks to the raving of this gentleman. Allow me to paint the situation in its true colors for your benefit."

"This gentleman, Jason Verner, by name, is blessed with a young and charming daughter, Cedora, almost of legal age. She has given her love and heart into the keeping of one Milo Tyrwhite, young, handsome, gallant, honest—in every way a most fitting mate for the young lady!"

"Bad blood—curse him!" muttered Jason Verner.

"Each one stands ready and even eager to wed the other, only for this—well, hard words will do no good. Jason Verner opposes the

match, for reasons which are without foundation in either fact or fancy. I advocate it even more positively—so positively that unless his full and free consent for the marriage ceremony to be performed is given, I'll hang him up by the neck until he's deadlier than the oldest patriarch that is mentioned in history, sacred or profane!"

"That would be cruel murder!" ejaculated the preacher.

"Which is part of my profession," with a low bow. "It is no idle threat. True as the sun shines in the heavens by day, just so surely will I keep my threats to the very letter if he persists in remaining sullen and obstinate! And he will not be the only sufferer, either."

"I will hang him. I will hunt up a squire or some other legal officer who can tie a knot of this peculiar sort fast enough to stand all pulling and tugging to untie it. Moral suasion may have more effect on a layman than on a priest. If that substitute fails me—so much the worse for Miss Verner!"

"There you have the case in a nutshell, dominie. Take a good, square look at it. Remember that the young people are madly in love with each other. Remember that one is fully the equal of the other in everything that goes to make equality in this world. Remember that only his obstinacy stands between them and happy safety; an obstinacy and hatred born of a family feud as bitter as it is senseless!"

"Bear all this in mind, and wrestle with the old gentleman while I look after some other matters. Bring him to Limerick, if you wish to save him from hanging, his daughter from still worse. And you, Jason Verner, recall the gentle arguments I made use of a little while ago!"

"When he yields to sober reason and religion, dear dominie, a man will be within call. Summon him, and bid him guide you to me. Until then—your humble servant!"

Private John Smith bowed low, then turned on his heel and strode rapidly away.

He passed direct to the rock cell where Milo Tyrwhite was kept under guard. A motion of his gloved hand dismissed that guard, and he stood before the young man with folded arms. A low, half-mocking laugh parted his lips as he spoke:

"A dreadfully long and woefully gloomy face for a young and passionate bridegroom to wear, methinks, Milo!"

There was something underlying his voice that revived the old, wild suspicion, and Milo Tyrwhite advanced, his face flushing, his eyes glowing, his voice unsteady.

"Who and what are you? Can it be that you are the brother I came so far to find? Can it be possible—"

A swift gesture from a gloved hand checked his agitated speech. He fell back a pace as Private John Smith said:

"Don't you try to crowd the mourners, my dear fellow! If I am your brother, the regulation strawberry leaf will be put on exhibition when the proper time comes for the dash of red fire and slow music, never you fear! Just at present, I'm a business man, pure and simple."

"If Jason Verner thinks better of this little affair in dispute, and consents to bestow the hand of his charming daughter on you, will you agree to marry her, off-hand?"

Milo Tyrwhite flushed hotly, then grew pale as death. For a brief space his voice seemed to fail him, but then he said:

"If she also consents, yes—a thousand times, yes!"

"Once will prove sufficient for our needs, lad," laughed the road-agent, lightly. "As for the consent, she has already partly given that. She will make no serious objections to the sacrifice, providing you can honestly assure her that you have had no hand in getting up this little comedy."

"You know I have not!" exclaimed the young man, eagerly.

"Of course I do, and so shall the charming bride-elect, if you will only compose yourself sufficiently for the interview, I will go and prepare her for your visit—Bah!" with another short, peculiar laugh. "You shall go with me, at once. She might doubt my truth, through a strange misconception of my character, but when you put on the lover-hug and breathe your sacred vows into her shell-like ears—good-by scruples!"

Milo Tyrwhite flushed at that hard, cynical speech, but his love was too great, too perfect for him to make even that a serious obstacle.

"Come, then—unless you are playing on my feelings with devilish art! If you are, look out! I'll kill you!"

It was a natural enough suspicion, all things considered, but Private John Smith took no offense.

"Does this look like it?" he laughed, as he drew a key from his pocket and knelt fearlessly at the feet of his captive, unlocking his irons. "If I meant you mischief, would I put myself so wholly in your power? Would I give you this chance to knock my brains out with those bracelets?"

Once more Milo Tyrwhite was thoroughly perplexed. Only for that frightful scene with the

luckless detective, he would be tempted once again to believe this his long-missing brother.

"Of course I would not shock the charming little lady so rudely by suffering you to enter her presence with those ornaments about you, my dear fellow," laughed Private John Smith, as he slipped an arm through that of his prisoner, and led him leisurely from the rock cell toward the chamber where Cedora Verner was kept in confinement. "She hates me quite intensely enough as it is. That would make her my enemy indeed! And, in confidence, my dear lad, I want her good-will and friendship far more than you may think, judging from the manner I have set about obtaining it."

"A strange method, surely!" muttered Milo Tyrwhite, still perplexed and doubting.

He did not know what to make of this man. One instant he felt forced to look upon him as a merciless demon in human guise, without a single redeeming quality. The next, doubts came as to the truth or justness of that estimate. He might be better than he seemed. He might be playing a wild, thoughtless but not wholly evil part. He might be—

He certainly was an *enigma*. That much was clear.

Private John Smith came to an abrupt halt, a touch of his gloved hand directed the attention of his companion to a dim and uncertain light before them, visible only through the perfect darkness in which they stood at that moment.

"That light comes from the room where love and beauty awaits your coming, my hero!" softly whispered the road-agent. "In yonder rests the charming Cedora. But bear with me for a moment or two. It is good advice I am giving you now."

"Keep nothing back from the little lady, my lad. Let her see and feel how precious she is in your estimation. Don't rear back on your dignity and thus give her time to take the alarm. Show her how ardently you love her, how eager you are to fling the mantle of your name over her, and take my word for it, she'll not throw you over her shoulder!"

Thus hurriedly speaking, Private John Smith did not wait for Milo to answer him, but strode forward, and gaining the suspended tapestry which served the purpose of a door, cried:

"Miss Verner, may I trouble you for a moment?"

A cold, hard tone made instant reply:

"Why make a pretense at courtesy? If you wish to intrude on my privacy you would do so whether I declined or no!"

"Thanks for your kind permission fair lady," laughed the road-agent, raising the tapestry and pushing his companion suddenly into the room. "Miss Verner, permit me to introduce to your favorable consideration Mr. Milo Tyrwhite!"

The lovers stood face to face. Cedora paid no attention to the mock introduction of the road-agent. A glad cry burst from her lips as she started forward, her arms outstretched—only to suddenly pause, gazing eagerly, searchingly into the glowing eyes of her lover, seeking to read there the truth.

Only for a single breath did that gaze last. She read the truth, and knew that her lover was innocent of all plotting against her. And then, with a low, sobbing cry of almost perfect rapture, she sprang into his arms!

Private John Smith silently withdrew, laughing softly.

"Didn't I know it?" he muttered exultantly, as he strode rapidly through the narrow passage toward the main chamber. "If I am the Worst Pill in the Box, I'm no idiot—not any!"

He found the Reverend Hiram Cowden seated beside Jason Verner, holding his thin hands and talking in low, gentle tones. He saw, despite the gloom, that the old man was weeping; that his hard features were strangely softened, and once more a low laugh rose in his throat. But there was no sign of this in his tones as he attracted the attention of the two men.

"Well, dominie, how goes it? Have you softened that flinty heart in the least?"

The little man rose to his feet with a serious air.

"Sir, I have acted for what my heart and conscience tells me is the best and wisest. I have counseled Mr. Verner to sacrifice his ancient grudge against Milo Tyrwhite, rather than have worse harm befall his child."

"Very sensibly done, too!" ejaculated Private John Smith. "I congratulate you on your work, if you have brought Brother Verner to fully realize the folly of holding out against the inevitable! I congratulate him—have I cause, Jason Verner?" he suddenly cried, bending forward for a closer look into that worn and haggard countenance. "Are you convinced? Have you undergone a change of heart in reality, or is this but another one of your short-lived freaks, to be upset with your next breath?"

The minister placed a fat hand on his arm, his voice almost stern and commanding, as he uttered:

"You are taking the very course to undo all I have been enabled to accomplish, sir. He has consented to see his child and the young gentleman. He agrees, if they are both fully willing,

if the gentleman can pledge his honor that he had no part or parcel in this wicked plot, to sanction their union."

"Good enough!" cried Private John Smith, his voice full of good-humor and geniality. "It would be a thousand pities to see such a noble resolution die a-bornin', and to escape that direful calamity, we'll make all haste to the place where the young turtle-doves are waiting for the verdict in fear and trembling. Mr. Verner, permit me!"

He raised the trembling old man to his feet, and supporting his footsteps, aided on the other side by the minister, led him to the chamber where the lovers were. He entered with them, but instantly retreated. And when the falling tapestry hid him from view, he laughed—through joy, or fiendishness?

CHAPTER XIX.

GRIM DEATH AT THE WEDDING FEAST.

"I PRONOUNCE you man and wife!"

It was a strange, peculiar scene, the climax of which those clear, grave, even solemn words announced!

In that gloomy, irregular rock chamber used by the Awkward Squad as their den during the intervals between their daring raids on their fellow beings, a wedding party had assembled.

The threats of Private John Smith had brought all this about, since the last obstacle was surmounted when Jason Verner gave his consent to the marriage of Cedora and Milo.

Rev. Hiram Cowden had satisfied himself that the young couple were really in love with each other, and that Cedora was perfectly willing to trust her future in the care of Milo Tyrwhite. Though she could have wished the surroundings different, the attendant circumstances more like those her maiden fancy had blushing pictured during those happy days before the clouds settled down between her and Milo, his grave yet ardent reasonings had overcome all scruples, and pale though her face, trembling her hand as the minister joined it to that of Milo Tyrwhite, she passed through the trying ordeal much more evenly than might have been expected.

They stood in the center of the rock chamber, Cedora and Milo hand in hand, facing the minister. Behind them stood Jason Verner and Private John Smith, the face of the latter still hidden from observation by that sable mask.

Back of Rev. Hiram Cowden stood two erect, masked figures holding smoking torches whose red, lurid light was added to the fainter rays of the dingy, smoky lanterns and lamps.

In a half-circle behind their chief, stood the rest of the Awkward Squad, armed to the teeth, dark, gloomy-looking, strange guests for a still stranger bridal!

After those solemn words, came a brief pause, in which the silence of death fell over all the company. Then, when the silence was becoming absolutely painful, the kind, simple-hearted preacher took the hands of the newly-wedded couple in his own, his voice shaken with emotion as he said:

"May the Father of all guide and protect your pathway in life, my dear young friends! May the future for you both be so bright that not even the faintest shadow from the past can dim it!"

He uttered a short, fervent prayer, then touched his lips to the brow of the newly-wedded bride. There were tears in his eyes as he drew back. He felt troubled, ill at ease, yet he believed he had acted all for the best.

A gay, careless laugh broke from behind the sable mask as Private John Smith stepped forward and deftly caught the hand of the bride, lifting it with a low bow to his veiled lips.

"My reward for playing the part of Cupid, Mrs. Milo Tyrwhite! And now—what is a wedding without a wedding feast? Delightful enough, no doubt, to those of the first part, but empty husks for the witnesses!"

"My friends," he added, with a sweeping glance of his glittering eyes, "you have only seen one side of Private John Smith of the Awkward Squad, as yet, and that side the very darkest and worst. If a rascal in general, there are a few commendable qualities in the reprobate, after all, and I beg for a fair chance to prove this assertion."

"There is a little feast spread for us, by this time. Will you raise me to the seventh heaven of delight by accepting my invitation to eat, drink and be merry? Mrs. Milo Tyrwhite, may I have the exquisite pleasure?"

He took it. He still retained control of her hand, and as he spoke he drew it through his arm. He turned around and at a signal, the Awkward Squad broke ranks, falling back to either side and affording the party a free passage, two of the band leading the way with their torches.

There was one exception. Rev. Hiram Cowden hesitated a moment about accepting the invitation, and when he finally overcame his scruples in his solicitude for the fair young bride, it was too late. His progress was barred, and two grim masks unceremoniously hustled him off through the opposite passage to that taken by the bridal party.

And then his worst fears came back with redoubled force!

Laughing, chatting gayly, Private John Smith led the party to the chamber which had been set apart for Cedora Verner and occupied by her ever since her first arrival at the den of the Awkward Squad. As he drew aside the tapestry, it was seen that busy hands had been at work there since they left it last.

A table of some sort had been extemporized, though the snowy cloth that hung to the floor prevented the curious eye from determining just how or of what. It stood in the middle of the little rock chamber, showing three covers on the side furthest from the entrance, while a single plate marked the side opposite.

There was food in abundance, and of a much finer quality than might have been expected in such a retreat. The table glittered with glass and silverware, while on the floor stood several wooden buckets filled with bottles, the shape and bright foil caps of which hinted at a journey from beyond the seas.

"Blessed be they who expect nothing, for when they stumble over a bite and sup, they take what is placed before them and sigh not for better!" laughed Private John Smith as he handed the bride to the middle seat on the further side of the table. "If the will was all, I'd give you pearls to eat and diamond-juice to drink! As it is, with the limited market in this benighted region, I can only offer you a bite and sup of the best Small Hopes could afford. Pray be seated, gentlemen!"

They obeyed, but plainly with uneasiness. Now that he had gained the first point on which he had insisted with such strange pertinacity, would Private John Smith keep the pledges he had made on his side? Would he set them at liberty? Or—

Jason Verner could contain himself no longer, and cried:

"It's all very nice, of course, but I'm a great deal more interested in the point—when are we to be set at liberty? When will you keep your pledge of returning us, unharmed, to Small Hopes?"

Private John Smith dropped into the chair opposite them. As though this was a signal, two dark and silent figures entered the rock chamber, taking up their stations behind the trio, apparently for the purpose of waiting on them. They were evidently members of the Awkward Squad, for they wore black cloth masks over their faces, and silently obeyed the slightest gesture of the chief.

"My dear sir," drawled Private John Smith, as he turned his plate over like one who meant business from an eating point of view, "pray control your impatience for just a few fleeting minutes. Life is long, and the feeding-stations too far apart, as it is! I am hungry—most unromantically hungry, in fact, not to put too fine a point upon it! Remember, I pray you, all, I am not one who has just crossed the threshold of paradise through the gates of matrimony! And—I live by eating! Pleasure first, is my motto, whenever I see good things to eat and drink before me. Business afterward."

It was a new mood for their captor, and neither of the uneasy trio cared to cross him in it before being obliged to do so. Though he had brought to pass the dearest dream of the two youngest, even they doubted and feared him.

And so, with but little real enjoyment aside from Private John Smith, the wedding feast went on. And heartily as he ate and drank, the chief of the Awkward Squad found ample time to use his tongue in persuading the bride to keep him at least the semblance of company. And so gay was he, so bright and genial his remarks, that had the circumstances been of a less extraordinary nature—had this been a wedding feast after the conventional type, without a cloud of doubt or danger to mar the happiness of the newly-wedded couple—Private John Smith would have been voted an admirable table guest.

He pressed Cedora to taste of the wine that sparkled in her glass, and for fear of offending their strange host, she complied. Milo Tyrwhite honored the same toast with a bumper. Jason Verner needed little encouragement to drink. As often as the attentive waiters filled his glass he emptied it. The liquor seemed to have no further effect on him than to make his gray eyes sparkle more vividly, his face to slightly color, and his impatience to grow less controllable.

Time and again he propounded that all-important query; and as often did Private John Smith evade giving a direct answer, until after that toast had been fully honored by all.

Then, at a signal from his gloved hand, the two silent attendants glided silently from the rock chamber, letting the weighted tapestry fall behind them, leaving the four people alone together.

Private John Smith rose from his chair, with a short, peculiar laugh, his eyes glowing like living balls of fire, his voice sounding strangely exultant as he spoke:

"Since you are so impatient to leave this palace, arise! I will not lift a finger to prevent your departure. Arise, Jason Verner. What? no response, in word or action?"

His words were true! Not a muscle did either of the trio stir—not the slightest attempt to rise and avail themselves of his permission to depart! What did it mean?

Like statues they sat silent and motionless in their seats, as though suddenly turned to stone! Only for their eyes, filled with light and life, with an unutterable fright and horror, they might have been deemed dead!

"Arise, I command you!" uttered the chief of the Awkward Squad, his voice ringing sharply, but filled with an exultation that seemed fairly demonic. "Arise, and take your departure while the way is opened to you!"

Still not a word, not a motion, not a sign other than that fixed stare of horror!

Private John Smith laughed, softly, mellowly, yet with what seemed the pure essence of malignity. Then he added:

"Really, I did not believe you would be near so anxious to desert your humble servant as you tried to make out! I may say, I *knew* you would not accept your liberty even when it was offered you. Shall I explain why I felt so confident?"

He stood gazing upon them with his eyes glowing vividly. From face to face that gaze roved, lingering longest on the ghastly pale face of Jason Verner. If ever the foul fiend looked through human eyes, it was then and there!

Thus for a brief space that seemed an age to the helpless old man—then laughing again, Private John Smith spoke:

"Not many hours since Jason Verner accused me of being Stormy Steve. I convinced him he was yelping on the wrong trail then. Now—I take it all back!"

He removed the sable mask, tossing it on the table, revealing a dark, bronzed face, with harsh and rugged features. A face, but a false one! At a touch from his gloved fingers, the fastenings gave way, and the mask was dropped on the table, revealing the fair, bullet-marked face of Stormy Steve!

"Revelation number one!" he cried, as he resumed his seat, leaning carelessly back, beginning to uncover his hands. "But before proceeding further, off with all disguise! From this time on I'll handle you all without gloves!"

He knocked the head off a champagne bottle against the edge of the table, filling a glass and emptying it at a gulp.

"My gentle friends, open your ears and listen to the words of solid truth that are fairly bubbling up to my lips in their hurry to reach you! I'm Stormy Steve now, and I'm going to lay bare the whole plot in which you have played a not entirely cheerful or willing part!"

"In the first place, those letters which came to you and were the prime means of bringing you to this region, were genuine documents, and really just what they claimed to be. They were written by Albus Tyrwhite, eldest son of James Tyrwhite, the paternal progenitor of the handsome groom, here!"

"Albus struck it wonderfully rich. Fortune just smothered him with her golden favors. Everything he touched seemed to turn to the pure *oro*, until he became rich enough for a round hundred of hungry misers!"

"He never took to himself a wife. That was not his mission on earth, it appears. Anyhow, he lived single, and never felt the need of outside love or friendship until an old superstition took renewed hold upon him, and he fancied he was fated to die within a year. A fancy? Well, perhaps not quite that!" with a short, hard laugh as he drank again. "The year has not expired, yet!"

"This fancy led him to look back over the past, and finally he resolved to find out who, if any, of his family were still living. He acted on the idea, and you know the result. He sent for you all to come out here, resolved to make even the uncle who virtually exiled him rich from his mammoth fortune, if he would consent to the broken-off marriage of Milo with his daughter."

"You are Albus Tyrwhite!" faintly, brokenly came from the livid lips of Jason Verner.

Stormy Steve started and watched him keenly for a brief space, his eyes glowing vividly. Then he seemed satisfied that it was but a temporary return of speech, brought about by the intensity of the old man's fears and hatred.

"Better for you all if I were Albus Tyrwhite!" he cried, with a low, mocking laugh. "I am Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete. I am Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad, and I'm the Worst Pill in the Box! So much for what I am—now for what I have done."

"I marked Albus Tyrwhite for my game, long ago, but before I could lay all my plans for taking him in out of the wet, he took that crazy freak into his cracked brain, and sent for you to come and ram your arms to the shoulders into his—I mean into *my* little pile!"

"I didn't get onto his scheme until it was too late to checkmate it, and so I resolved to make the best of it. After all, it would give me a chance at another pigeon with feathers well worth plucking—*you*, Jason Verner!"

"While waiting for your arrival, I made sure of the first point in my little game for gold. I took Albus Tyrwhite prisoner, and though it

hardly sounds credible, he is not two-score yards from you this identical moment!

"You surely do not need me to remind you of what has transpired to each one of you since your arrival at Small Hopes? No, that would be an unnecessary waste of time and breath on my part. I hardly think you have forgotten the main points so soon!"

"Why have I taken so much trouble? Why have I spent so much wind in coaxing you all into a wedding? Why was I so anxious to make Miss Cedora Verner Mrs. Milo Tyrwhite? You are asking yourselves these questions, though your tongues are hardly in fit condition for putting them into plain speech. We will pretend you have propounded the queries, and now I'll proceed to answer them."

"Trouble? It is meat and drink to me! I can't get enough to do, as a general thing. Wind? Am I not Stormy Steve, the Human Cyclone? And then, I'm a humorous cuss, when the wind is in the right quarter! I just smack my lips over a chance to befool those who think all the world and half the stars were manufactured for their especial benefit! I fancied I saw an opening for a glorious mystification, and I jumped at it as a hungry spider does for a buzzing fly!"

"That is the light side of the picture; now for the reverse. If black, blame fate for giving gold to one and palming iron pyrites off on another."

"First, I repeat that Albus Tyrwhite is my prisoner. His men and business friends fancy he is off on a short trip connected with his mining interests. If he should die without returning, what so remarkable in that? Men die every day in the year, you know!"

"Though a bit of a sprout in his boyhood, Albus Tyrwhite, ever since fortune began smiling on him, has shown himself a man of business, with all that term implies. Of course, going on a long journey, he would take care to see that his house was placed in order. He would make a will. He has only one brother. Naturally, that brother would be the one selected as his successor."

"Albus Tyrwhite should have attended to all this before, but he wanted to see what sort of fellow this brother had grown up to be, and so delayed making his will. He will not neglect doing so much longer. You all have seen how persuasive I can become, on a pinch. I am going to try my powers on Albus Tyrwhite before another day rolls past. I am going to see that he does justice to his fine, handsome brother. In one word, he shall make his will in favor of you, Milo Tyrwhite; and as soon as it is made, I shall shut off his wind!"

A harsh, inarticulate cry parted the lips of Milo Tyrwhite at this atrocious declaration, and it really seemed as though his wild rage had overcome the power exercised by the subtle drug which the servants had put in his wine. But before he could rise from his seat, Private John Smith drew a revolver and leant forward until its muzzle almost touched the temple of Cedora Tyrwhite!

She shivered slightly, then sunk back in her chair, her eyes closed, looking like a corpse!

"Quiet, my gentle bridegroom, unless you have tired this soon of your charming wife!" sharply uttered the road-agent, his blue eyes glowing, his white teeth showing.

But it was only a spasmodic effort on the part of the young man. Once more he sat, stiff and rigid, only his eyes betraying signs of life and sensibility!

"That's better!" laughed the outlaw, though he kept his weapon still in his hand, lying on the table. "For a moment I began to believe those rascals of mine had made a mistake in the dose of soothing-syrup, but now I ask their pardon!"

"Why am I so bent on enriching you, as well as making you the husband of a charming young bride? To give you a fleeting taste of the sweet before taking the draught of bitter, maybe! To pay you back good for evil, perchance," and he tapped the cut which showed so plainly between his eyes, made at Billy's Bower by the steel-like knuckles of the young man now sitting opposite him, so helpless, so completely at his mercy.

"I say it might be for those reasons, but it is not, all the same! I am not so anxious to enrich you, as I am to give the charming Cedora a dower as nearly as possible equal to her sweet charms of person and mind. To use the vernacular, she's my huckleberry!"

"How, do you ask? Did you ever read a certain production by some literary sort of animal, novel, sermon or something of the sort—I'm not much of a student, you see, my dear fellow!—called 'The Best Man Comes Out On Top,' or words to that effect?"

"Albus Tyrwhite wills his property to you, and then considerably steps off the stage of life for good and all. Our old friend here, Jason Verner, has already made a will to the same effect. He is growing old, and begins to look very skeleton-like about the gills. I hardly think this robust climate agrees with him!"

"I am ready to bet that he will not live much longer. Why should he? He has had his fling, and having seen his daughter nicely married off,

it is only fit and proper that he step down and out—as he certainly will! And his departure to a better world will leave the charming Cedora a double heiress!"

"And now comes the milk of the cocoanut!"

"You are a fine, smart, likely young fellow, my dear Milo, but even you—as the recently made husband of the charming Cedora!—must admit that you are hardly worthy the prize! You are generous, for you will make a will which gives everything to your wife. You are considerate, for when you find yourself so completely in the way of a better man, you will crawl into your hole, never to leave it until Gabriel toots his horn!"

"And then—you remember my saying something about having taken a solemn oath to marry a widow? Then—I shall make my oath good, and your widow my wife, at a single stroke!"

Slowly, deliberately, like one who rolls a particularly delicious morsel over and over his tongue before swallowing it, Private John Smith uttered those words.

Milo Tyrwhite seemed striving desperately to cast off that frightful incubus, and he did manage to gasp:

"Never! I'll kill you, first!"

Private John Smith laughed maliciously, tauntingly.

"Why don't you do it, my dear fellow?"

Then his mocking air vanished, and leaning across the table he uttered with almost savage intensity:

"Because there is death at the wedding feast! Because I have poisoned you and him, drugging your wife! When you leave that chair, it will be to follow Old Tom Moore to the pit!"

"As for your will, I will forge that, easily enough. I will torture your wife into marrying me! Do you doubt my ability to win the game, delicate as it may appear? Have I failed so far? Have I not fully proved my claim to being the Worst Pill in the Box?"

Surely he was more demon than man!

CHAPTER XX.

"BALANCE ALL!"

"FATHER! wake up!"

There was a muffled, impatient tattoo on the panels of his door, and with a start and a gasp, Jason Verner sat up in bed, staring bewilderedly about him.

What did it all mean? This was certainly his room at the Sanctuary! Yonder was his hat—there his clothes—

"Father, I say!" repeated that clear, laughing voice. "Are you going to spend all this glorious day in bed? Have you the slightest idea of the hour? And your appointment? Are you going to prove false to that? Now *do* get up, or I'll go down stairs and beg the deacon to have all the fire-bells in town rung for your especial benefit!"

And that voice? It surely was that of Cedora, his only child! But—what did it all mean?

Jason Verner stared helplessly about him, his poor brain in a terribly tangled snarl. This did not look exactly like what he had heard the other world pictured, yet surely he was there—he must be! Or, was it but a frightful nightmare?

The chamber door opened and a bright vision glided across the floor, but it was a very human-like pair of arms that were flung about his neck, and remarkably unghostly red lips that kissed him a dozen times over in far less time than a spook would take to make the first motion!

"Father, you are growing terribly indolent in your old age! Here it is ten o'clock, and you still in bed! With your dressing to do, your breakfast to eat, and the gentlemen whom you appointed a meeting with at ten, already cooling their heels in the parlor below!"

Jason Verner stared at the speaker, his eyes filled with a vague, dizzy wonder. It was Cedora. She looked remarkably bright and happy and untroubled. Yet—it was either all a horrible nightmare dream, or else they were in the other world, to find it simply a continuation of the first one!

"I saw her fall back, dead—and then I died, too!" he muttered, incoherently.

Cedora kissed him again, and her lips felt very warm and full of life to be those of an angel!

"You have been dreaming father? I fancied I heard you tossing and tumbling in the night—these partition walls are so dreadfully thin!"

"Was it all a dream?" faltered the dazed old man.

"Of course—it *must* have been, if it was anything very disagreeable; for oh, papa!" and her arms went about his neck and her lips touched his a full score of times in dainty little pecks, as though she were a canary bird and he her loved mistress! "You have made me so happy—so happy! If I live until my hair turns white as snow, I can never thank you half enough for your kindness to—*to him and me!*"

"And Stormy Steve?" mechanically muttered the old man.

"Mr. Hasbrook, you mean? Well, he is waiting very patiently for you to keep your appointment, father. And—did you even suspect it?—he is some one else—not Stormy Steve!"

"I know—Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad! The Worst Pill in the Box!" mut-

tered Jason Verner, still like one in a waking dream or under the stupefying influence of drugs.

Cedora laughed musically, merrily, yet with something like wonder in her tones, her face and eyes.

"Did you dream of that terrible wretch, too, father? It is strange, but perhaps you heard something of the alarm after we retired, last night?"

"Yes, I heard—and I felt it, too!" muttered Verner.

"They say he will be lynched before his captors can take him to prison. Of course he deserves it for his many frightful crimes, but still, I could almost find it in my heart to pity him—poor fellow!"

"Poor fellow!" mechanically uttered Jason Verner, but even in his dizzy dreams he put a very different emphasis on the term; the lament became a curse!

Cedora stepped back, her brows tortured into a frown that contrasted charmingly with the roguish smile playing about her red lips.

"Father, unless you immediately arise, dress yourself, and come down-stairs to keep your appointment, I'll—do something awful! I'll—yes, I'll disown you as a parent, and run off with a handsomer man!"

She turned and fled from the room, leaving Jason Verner as thoroughly in the fog as ever. He did not know whether he was living or dead and in another world. He could not say for sure whether all those trials and tortures were purely imaginary, born of a troubled and unhealthy sleep, or reality.

He slipped from bed and began to don his garments. He found himself unusually clumsy on his feet, and his fingers seemed to be all thumbs. There was a peculiar haze dancing before his eyes that made everything look distorted and unreal, whenever he tried to gaze at it fixedly. And when he at last opened his door and cautiously made his way down-stairs, he was still undecided as to the actual facts.

Deacon Patmore met him at the bottom of the flight, panting, mopping his red and glowing face with a damp kerchief, his huge frame all aquiver with excitement and importance.

"The Lord love you, squire!" he spluttered, grasping Jason Verner by the hand and shaking it as vigorously as he might have worked a pump-handle to help put out a fire that threatened to burn him out of house and home. "Wonderful times! The most wonderfullest I ever struck, an' he who says no is a howlin' liar from the peak o' nat'ral cussedness!"

"Jes' think! That durned dirty, greasy, ragged, fiddle-torturin' bummer, Old Tom Moore, to turn out a way-up detective feller, an' smart enough to run in Private John Smith o' the Awkward Squad, an' all his gang!"

"An' then—a weddin' to come off in the Sanctuary! A weddin' supper to git up! An' the ole woman dead this ten year! An' only me fer to do a cussed thing! An' ef I don't go plum' off my nut, then you kin run me fer President o' the United States—fer I'll be fit fer it, now I tell you!"

A final wrench and shake, and then his huge form plunged off at an angle, and Jason Verner dizzily groped his way to the parlor-door, turned the knob and crossed the threshold.

He saw two gentlemen rise to their feet at his entrance, approaching him with extended hands. He saw another man sitting very near to the side of his daughter Cedora, and he gave a faint gasp of wonder as he recognized in the last the rosy, childlike face of the Reverend Hiram Cowden.

"I knew it!" he muttered, faintly. "Dead—in Heaven!"

And yet—those were very human-feeling hands that now enveloped his trembling fingers. One—surely that was the face of Stormy Steve! Those plastered cuts on the cheek, the temple, bore evidence to his identity. And the other—Jason Verner began to frown with something of the old hatred as he recognized Milo Tyrwhite.

Was it Heaven they had reached? Would he be there? And could angels retain hatred like his?

The poor old man was even more thoroughly bewildered than ever. It could not be the upper world, or Milo Tyrwhite would never have been permitted to enter the gates. Nor the lower world, for yonder sat Cedora—it must be all a dream!

Slowly and gradually the peculiar effects of the drug, which had been administered him in his wine, passed off, and Jason Verner began to realize what had occurred. With a clearer brain his old and long-cherished grudge began to revive, but before they could actually burst forth into flame, Stormy Steve, now dressed as Jason Verner had seen him as Stephen Hasbrook, stepped to his side and silently placed a slip of paper in his hands.

Jason Verner mechanically glanced at it, and a little cry of wonder escaped his lips as he saw what it meant. It was a certified check on a Denver bank, payable to Jason Verner, for one hundred thousand dollars!

And the signature, bold and unmistakable, was that of—*Albus Tyrwhite!*

"As a bond of friendship between you and I,

uncle!" the strange man uttered, soberly. "May you forget the past and all its unpleasantnesses as completely as I forget them!"

He placed a second paper in the trembling hand, saying:

"My gift to the newly married couple, Papa Verner!"

It was a certificate of deposit, made out in the names of Milo Tyrwhite and Cedora Tyrwhite, his wife. And it bore the magical figures "\$1,000,000!"

Jason Verner gasped and panted. He rubbed his eyes, looking first at the check, then into the face that was now smiling brightly above him. He rubbed his eyes and scrutinized the certificate of deposit, and once more stared bewilderedly into those laughing blue eyes. He could do no more. He tried to speak, but in vain. More than ever he felt that he was still under the influence of a truly remarkable dream!

"I am Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete, only on very rare occasions," said this strange being. "I have tried to play the part of Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad. I have even been the Worst Pill in the Box! But now and henceforward, Uncle Jason, you must know me only as Albus Tyrwhite, the wild lad who ran away from home to make his fortune! Who, having made far more than he can ever hope to spend, though he live to an age that will put in the shade the memory of the oldest patriarch of them all, is hoping to build up the family names of Tyrwhite and Verner—who wishes all in whose veins run blood akin to him, to share his prosperity!"

At a sign from him, the others rose and came forward. He took the cold, trembling hands of Jason Verner, and in them he placed the hands of Milo and Cedora. He held them all firmly within his own strong palms as he added:

"Even as you hope for mercy when you are called to the Judgment seat, Jason Verner, I hope that you will soften your heart and cast out all old grudges against brother Milo and myself. If you can forgive but one of us, let it be him. For, on my sacred word of honor, he had no part or parcel in the wild little comedy which I alone planned, plotted and carried out to the end!"

"For my sake, father!" murmured Cedora, her red lips touching his quivering ones. "For my sake—and the sake of my dear husband!"

It was granted. Possibly because of that generous check and truly munificent dowry—but it was given, and that was quite sufficient for the happy young pair, without inquiring too closely as to the motives that brought it about.

And then there came explanations, fast and many. Hours were consumed in making all points clear, but much less time will suffice to make the few remaining points of doubt sufficiently clear for the attentive reader to see his way through.

Albus Tyrwhite was an eccentric fellow, even in childhood, and as he grew older this trait became even more pronounced.

When he ran away from home he went to sea, first of all. He tired of that, and soon after blossomed out as a circus performer. He was a natural athlete, and with practice and older days he became a marvel of strength, skill and daring. Something of what he was is shadowed forth in this story.

He left the sawdust ring and finally became a prospector and miner. Fortune favored him until he became one of the wealthiest men in the business. Then he hunted up his relatives whom he had lost sight of for so many years. He found them, he learned of the trouble which had arisen between the lovers, and rightly attributed it to the plottings of Jason Verner. He quietly satisfied himself that Milo was honorable and true, that Cedora was loving and pure. And then his eccentric brain evolved the intricate plot which we have traced almost to the end.

He brought them all to Small Hopes, where he was known only as Stephen Hasbrook and "Stormy Steve," when the routine of business grew unbearable and he wandered far from his business haunts to "blow off steam!" He hired men whom he could thoroughly trust, and then—the plot opened at Billy's Bower.

Unknown to him, at first, the matter-of-fact road-agent who assumed the peculiar title of "Private John Smith of the Awkward Squad," also had an eye on the wealthy miser, thinking to extort a large sum in ransom money from the father by playing on his love for his child. One attempt was made to abduct her, ending as detailed.

It was the genuine Private John Smith who rescued Bill Jones from the lynchers that first night. And Old Tom Moore, the Relic of '49, who was a detective on the trail of one Fremont Quarles, an escaped murderer and forger, having fled from Billy's Bower when Bill Jones swore he was the chief of the gang of road-agents, took his track and dogged him to his secret retreat in the hills.

Satisfied that he would lay low for some little time after that daring raid, the detective returned and secretly had an interview with Stormy Steve that same night. He showed himself in his true colors, and Stormy Steve lent

him his men to attack and capture the road-agent band. This was performed so well that not a shot was fired nor a life lost on either side.

That same night was well employed by Stormy Steve. He had his men capture and carry off Milo Tyrwhite. He himself captured and bore off Cedora Verner, returning to Small Hopes early enough in the morning to receive the half-distracted father. It was into a band of his own men that he led the old man. His bullets went wide of the mark, despite the fact that more than one of the supposed road-agents reeled and flung up their arms in—seeming—death! And it was a mock Private John Smith who pretended to slay him, in return.

Deacon Patmore was one of those whom the gold of Albus Tyrwhite bought over to aid him, when convinced that no actual harm was intended. It was by his aid that Jason Verner was drugged, and the rooms adjoining those occupied by father and daughter were left vacant on that eventful night.

And the capture and hanging of the Relic of '49? Nothing more than a bit of adroit acting, to all the more thoroughly convince his captives that he was indeed "the Worst Pill in the Box!"

It was a genuine Relic who first stood with the rope around his neck. It was flesh and blood that made that bold dash into the dark passage, where he kept up the struggle long enough for the noose to be adjusted around the neck of an ingeniously constructed dummy. It was that dummy who hung, whose limbs were twitched by slender wires, held in hands hidden by the gloom that filled the passage. And the deftly hurled knives of "Private John Smith" shed no blood, let out no struggling life!

Up to until a few moments before the wedding ceremony in the rock chamber, neither Cedora nor Milo knew the whole truth. Then Albus Tyrwhite made himself known to them, and under protest they consented to aid him in carrying out the remainder of his wild plot. They were assured that no harm should come to Jason Verner. And if they refused, Albus declared he would wash his hands of the entire affair; would tell Jason Verner the precise truth, and then set him at liberty.

They knew the old man would be so enraged by the revelation, so frantic at the useless fears he had suffered, that he would never consent to the wedding. And so, they yielded.

They were not drugged at the feast, but Jason Verner was. They played their part as perfectly as they could, and—but why dilate when all must be sufficiently clear to the reader who has followed us thus far?

Still under the influence of the drug, Jason Verner was carried back to the Sanctuary and put to bed. How he awoke, and what followed, the reader has already seen.

There was a duplicate wedding that same evening, performed by Rev. Hiram Cowden, in the parlor of the Sanctuary. And after it came another wedding feast, on which Deacon Patmore "just spread himself wide open!"

And then there was a general hand-shaking, and a genuine reconciliation between the relatives who had hated each other in the past. The hatchet was buried, never to be dug up again. So each man declared, and so each man firmly believed. And so it has been to this day.

Jubal Tinker—no longer "Old Tom Moore, the Relic of '49!"—was one of the most interested witnesses to the ceremony, and after the wedding feast was over, and the men drew apart to smoke their cigars and wish the newly-wedded couple long life and unclouded happiness, he told how he had hunted Fremont Quarles for many long months; told how he became convinced he was none other than the road-agent operating under the title of Private John Smith, of the Awkward Squad; told of the black and evil deeds committed before the villain came West; and ended up by predicting a hanging-bee back in the States.

And the newspapers of that same fall came to Small Hopes with full accounts of the last act of Fremont Quarles—a solo performed on a single rope!

As for Billy's Bower and its genial owner; as for all the rest of our minor characters; go to Small Hopes and you shall learn all the most inquisitive mind could wish.

But you will not find Stormy Steve. He was never seen after the wedding at the Sanctuary. Albus Tyrwhite accompanied his relatives to Boston, and is still living there with them, teaching two bright little youngsters to "play circus."

He has no other business, now. His mining property is all sold, and he and Milo are doing all they can to build up the old name.

Jason Verner? Growing mellow and more lovable as his age increases. He loves Milo and Albus almost as much as he does his own child. He loves his grandchildren still more dearly. He has plenty of time to count over his gold. But now and then he may be seen to shake his head slowly, uncertainly.

At such times he is wondering, after all, if those days in and around Small Hopes were not all a weird, fantastic dream!

THE END.

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